NOVEL
2
I'M THE EVIL LORD OF AN INTERGALACTIC EMPIRE
WRITTEN BY Yomu Mishima
ILLUSTRATED BY Nadare Takamine

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EILA
"Love is powerful, after all. It can overcome all obstacles!"
"Y-you think so?"
LIAM

KURT
"Erm, it's not that my pay has dropped and I can't afford nice stuff or anything. Oh, right! I've started working out, so I've been wearing things like this lately!"
"So... your pay dropped."
"If you would allow me to board with you, I could explain their attributes in greater detail."
THIS
(sports bra)
NIAS
EULISIA

AG003-M114S
TIA'S NEMAIN
The boosters on her back spread apart, and light blazed from their nozzles, making them look even more like the wings of some warrior angel.
"At least your pleading serves as some nice back-ground noise."
CHRISTIANA

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WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

NADARE TAKAMINE

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

MORE THAN TEN THOUSAND enormous battleships cruised through space, bearing the crest of House Banfield. Traveling in formation, they headed straight for the enemy. Count Banfield's flotilla—*my* flotilla—was fearsome in both form and number, a force any thrill-seeking boy would dream of commanding.

This is my army, I thought proudly. I've attained such power in this world!

On the gaudily decorated bridge of my battleship, I leaned back in my especially gaudy seat and crossed my legs. Our targets, a group of cowardly space pirates, had already turned tail and were trying to flee from us.

My name is Liam Sera Banfield. I may have looked like a thirteen-year-old kid on the outside, but I'd already lived another life before I was reincarnated here, so I had the mind of an adult. The thirty or so years of my past life hardly meant a thing in this world, where people lived for hundreds of years.

That previous life had been…rather unfortunate. It pained me to even think back on it. My memories were those of a foolish man who fell for a woman's tricks and lost everything. What had I done wrong? Had it all been her fault? No, it'd been my fault for being so ignorant. The man I was back then naively believed goodness was a virtue and never doubted those around him. He'd died because of that, and what a humiliating death it was.

At the very least, I learned one important thing from my past life: Living a good and earnest life earned you nothing but self-satisfaction. In any world, the strong ruled the weak. So now that I'd been granted a second life, I would become one of the strong and relish in trampling the weak underfoot. In my past life, I'd endured all sorts of misery and injustice, but now it was my turn to make others suffer.

At last, my wish had been granted. Or was it still a work in progress? I hadn't yet achieved the true power I desired, but I was getting there slowly but surely. The proof was in how I was chasing these pirates right now.

I was currently a count in the Intergalactic Algrand Empire. To be honest, I was basically just a low-ranking noble who ruled over a planet out in the boonies. Even so, I could call an entire world my own, and I had my eyes on other planets in the vicinity that I might use to expand my domain.

This was a bizarre world, far more scientifically advanced than the one I'd known, and magic existed here too. For some reason, the feudal system was still intact, and the nobles of the Empire were able to do whatever they liked with their domains. It was a real mismatch. I couldn't get over the fact that there was still a rigid class system in place in a universe with such advanced science and magic, but I intended to exploit this situation to the best of my abilities.

I would use my status as a noble to become a villain. No, I already was a villain—an evil lord. I'd already committed the kinds of wrongs that would never have been permitted in my previous world.

Once I reached the age of five here, I recalled the memories of my past life. Since then, I'd been developing my domain however I pleased. "Developing" might make it sound positive, but what I'd been doing was pretty subversive. I'd basically just forced a new life onto my people in order to realize my own goals.

As for my goals… Well, first of all, a villain had to be strong. Only the strong could persecute the weak, after all. To that end, I had to shape my domain into the perfect territory for an evil lord to rule over.

The planet I'd inherited from my father at age five had already been exploited by a villain. In other words, my wish was granted before I could even act. But I couldn't let that stand! I could acknowledge my own failings, but I would never again allow myself to suffer because of someone else's mistakes. Therefore, I developed my domain to make it more affluent.

At a glance, that might seem like a strange thing to do for someone aiming to become an evil lord, but it was necessary in order to achieve my goals in the long run. I wasn't satisfied with just being handed an exploited populace; I needed to do the exploiting myself. Thus, I had to begin by making my people wealthier. And just as I'd planned, my domain grew affluent. My ignorant subjects were enjoying their plentiful lives, blissfully unaware that I would one day plunge them into hell.

Currently, I was damning a different group: the bandits known as space pirates. In the process of revitalizing my territory, I'd reorganized my military, and I'd sent my newly strengthened army out for some pirate-hunting.

These guys were trash, and if left alone, they'd wreak serious havoc in my domain. They reminded me of the scary-looking debt collectors who'd harassed me in my past life, so I was having a lot of fun crushing them. Call it vengeance, or just venting pent-up anger, if you'd like. Enjoyable as it was to defeat them, I was starting to get tired of this little game.

While the boring fight with the pirates continued, I raised my hand to stifle a yawn. I observed the enemy ships as they fled from my own.

As their name implied, these people carried out piracy in space. Not belonging to any nation, these rogues roved through space attacking and plundering planets or traveling ships. Some of them were particularly dangerous, and there were even a handful of fearless outlaws who went up against the personal armies of nobles. Plenty of rulers and armies underestimated the space pirates and suffered an unexpected defeat. But even the most formidable pirates were no match for me now.

The powerful military I'd assembled, a honed weapon of my own brutality, equaled the Empire's regular army in quality, skill, and numbers. "I'll take down any pirate I come across!" I'd proclaimed. However, my adversary had proved a poor challenge. They'd intruded into my domain with a measly

few thousand ships, and when I'd gone out to meet them with the army I was so proud of, they'd ended up being total wimps. It wasn't even worth dealing with them. The only thing they could do was run.

"This is boring. I don't even need to deploy the Avid."

In this world, there were massive humanoid weapons called mobile knights. Launched from battleships, these fifteen-meter giants carried out dramatic battles in space. I possessed my own personal craft called the Avid. I'd poured plenty of money into the thing to give it monstrous specs. The pirate crew was so weak, however, that I didn't feel like going out in the Avid to fight them. They weren't even putting up a fight, so our pursuit of them was purely businesslike—no fun at all.

"I shouldn't even have come out here," I muttered, clenching my fist as if I were crushing the pirate ship on the screen in front of me. Pointless, sure, but I was just *so* bored. "Wipe them out."

How uncanny it must've seemed, this child in his fancy seat giving orders and all the important adults hurrying to fulfill his command with a respectful salute. My army's high-ranking officers, dressed in their crisp uniforms, ordered their men to thoroughly destroy our pirate adversaries.

"Annihilate the enemy pirates."

"They want to surrender? Pirates don't deserve mercy. Lord Liam wants them wiped out."

"Don't let a single ship escape. Turn them all to scrap!"

The soldiers obeyed my will and ruthlessly obliterated the pirate ships. They didn't even show clemency to the ones who surrendered. I'd ordered them not to, after all. My men were a truly capable bunch, and yet here they were, following the orders of someone who looked like a child. An elite group who commanded a fleet of twelve thousand ships had to obey my every order because I was nobility. That was the class system at work. No matter how skilled they might be, a commoner could never defy a noble. The nobility held absolute power here in the Empire.

Per my orders, the soldiers fought and the space pirates were destroyed before my eyes. I smiled as I watched, despite the fact that I was at war. I was wholly aware that I'd truly become irredeemable scum. Here I was enjoying the most unproductive and unforgivable acts in the world. There was no question about it: I was a villain.

"I love to watch pirates meet their doom. Makes for a great show."

A soldier stood next to me. This wasn't one of my men, but a soldier dispatched from the Imperial Army. Her military uniform had a tight skirt and displayed the insignia of a lieutenant. Her name was Eulisia Morisille, and she belonged to the Algrand Empire's Third Weapons Factory, but she wasn't an engineer—just a regular soldier. However, she looked more like a model or actress to me. Her hair fell to her back and had a bit of curl to it, but it looked glossy and well taken care of. Her modest makeup perfectly accentuated her facial features. She must have paid attention to her figure

as well because her body was slim but shapely. She appeared more like someone's beautiful secretary than a soldier.
Her job was to peddle the products of the Third Weapons Factory, so she was basically a salesperson. The Third Weapons Factory sure knew their stuff if they were sending such a pretty lady out there. I appreciated the gesture for sure. They were a lot different from the Seventh Weapons Factory…
"Well, what do you think of the Third Weapons Factory's main product?"
"From what I heard, you only made minor improvements, but it seems to me like the specs are a lot higher."
"Yes, we made sure to take previous feedback into account and improved as many aspects as we could. We pay a lot of attention to design as well, so I think our ships would fit right in with your army, my lord."
I had a good grasp of the precise differences in specs thanks to data, images, and video, and the ships felt good to use in an actual battle, as this test run proved. More than anything else, the soldiers manning the ships had a good reputation.
"I like 'em. I'll take 'em."
"Thank you so much. As a representative of the Third Weapons Factory, I'm very pleased to hear that."
A portion of my army on this pirate hunt was on loan from the Third Weapons Factory. I was trying out some of their ships, weapons, and mobile knights. The ships had a stunning look to them, but their specs were a little bit lower than the ones I typically bought from the Seventh Weapons Factory. Even so, I thought they were worth the price. For the price of two ships from the Seventh Weapons Factory, I could get three ships from the Third, with slightly lower specs but a much more appealing design. If you considered more than just their performance, they were well worth the expense.
Eulisia bowed her head, a graceful smile on her face. She didn't seem particularly nervous to be interacting with a noble. She was probably used to these conversations.
I decided to tell Eulisia I was considering buying a superdreadnought from her factory.
"I'm sure you're aware of this, but the Empire has permitted House Banfield to purchase a superdreadnought. I wasn't sure who I wanted to buy it from, but maybe I'll pick you."
"We'd be delighted if you chose us. Do you have any special requests?"

“Well, let’s see…”
The Third Weapons Factory *did* lag behind the Seventh a bit when it came to technological prowess, but it was hard to discount them entirely for that. This would be House Banfield’s first superdreadnought, and I wanted the incredibly huge battleship to look good *and* perform spectacularly. I was willing to put up with the slightly lower specs if the design was that much better. Ostentation was important, after all. If I acquired it from the Seventh Weapons Factory, I was sure they’d hand over a gigantic ship with great specs that looked downright awful.
While I was considering my future plans, Engineering Captain Nias Carlin, dressed in coveralls, rushed to my side and raised her voice in alarm.
“What are you doing, Lord Liam? You told me you were going to buy your superdreadnought from the Seventh!”
I looked up and rolled my eyes, and Eulisia didn’t seem to know what to say. I didn’t remember making any such promise to Nias. In fact, I knew I hadn’t.
“I said no such thing—don’t just make stuff up. If this outburst were coming from anyone else, I’d have them thrown in jail for spreading falsehoods.”
The military personnel nearby were under the impression I liked Nias, so they weren’t sure what to do about her. A few of them seemed to be hesitating over whether they should subdue her.
Meanwhile, surrounded by those imposing soldiers, Nias was becoming teary-eyed. “You’re terrible! I thought for sure you’d order it from us!”
She sank to the floor, and the men on the bridge cast all sorts of complex looks her way.
Nias had cropped black hair and could clearly care less about her makeup. Still, with the addition of glasses, she managed to pull off an “intellectual beauty” look, since her natural features were just that good.
I had to admit I *was* rather fond of Nias, who was a scientist and engineer of the Seventh Weapons Factory. She was also in charge of the maintenance of the Avid. Capable as she was at her job, Nias was regrettably an eccentric.
Eulisia let out a quiet sigh. They must have been previously acquainted because there was no formality between them.
“You again, Engineering Lieutenant Carlin?”
“I’ve been promoted to captain! En-gi-neer-ing cap-tain! Show some respect for a superior officer!”
“What in the world was the Seventh thinking, sending *you* to the count? I just can’t comprehend it.”
Being that Nias was an engineer, I’d always found it odd that she handled sales for the Seventh. It seemed Eulisia agreed. In fact, Nias was a rather poor example of a salesperson. When it came to explaining the tech side of things, she was great, but she just wasn’t skilled at the selling part. She was also quite an awkward person who sometimes used her sex appeal to push her products (to very limited effect).

“What, do you two know each other? You seem awfully close,” I asked Eulisia, and she gave a reluctant nod.
“We do know each other, but we aren’t close. We’ve just run into each other a few times on sales calls. I’ll admit she’s a brilliant engineer, but as for her sales abilities, well…”
Nias bristled at the implication. “What’s that supposed to mean? I sell plenty of the Seventh’s products. In fact, I was ranked first in sales this year!”
“No way! You were first?”
This lady really sold that much stuff? I was honestly surprised. But while I was wondering if she had more talent than I’d given her credit for, Eulisia revealed the truth of the matter.
“That’s just because of your sales to House Banfield, isn’t it? I know you haven’t sold anything to any other nobles.”
I shot a look at Nias, and she averted her eyes. So she was only first because of the weapons *I’d* bought from her; she wouldn’t have sold a thing if not for me. It really was a pity… Now I knew why she’d been so desperate to please me. In any case, the Seventh Weapons Factory must have profited quite a bit from my enthusiastic military expansion.
“By the way, umm…” Nias piped up, perhaps unable to bear the uncomfortable air any longer. “The Avid’s maintenance is complete. Would you like to take a test run?”
While Nias tried to change the subject, I turned toward the bow of the ship. The monitors and holographic displays all showed the pirates being surrounded by my fleet and thoroughly crushed. The battle was nearly over.
“I’m not going out today,” I said. “These guys are too weak.”
“O-oh. That’s too bad; it’s all tuned up. Well, I suppose they wouldn’t make the best opponents.”
Eulisia had come with me on this little excursion to sell me the Third Weapons Factory’s products, while I’d brought Nias along just to perform maintenance on the Avid.
“Your fleet is really something, my lord,” Eulisia said, obviously impressed. “You’ve taken hardly any damage against quite a large pirate gang. Your troops could pass for the Empire’s regular army.”
“I’m not satisfied with them yet.”
I wouldn’t rest until I had even more. Plus, it wasn’t just numbers that were important—I had to make sure my troops were well-trained and well-equipped. My current forces were far from my ideal army.
“I’ve been thinking I should bolster their numbers soon, and I’m tired of getting hand-me-downs from the Imperial Army. Anyway, Eulisia, let’s see some of your new products.”
Eulisia beamed at my interest in purchasing other wares. “I’ll send them over right away.”
Nias, meanwhile, looked like she was losing all hope as she listened to our discussion. “Lord Liam? Actually, I…erm… My boss wanted me to get a new

contract signed, so if possible, I'd really like it if you could purchase some things from us as well. It doesn't have to be a superdreadnought, but if you could buy some battleships… Ah, even just some cruisers would be wonderful…"

As she pleaded with me, Nias looked even more pitiful than usual beside Eulisia. The lieutenant, for her part, just looked away and sighed. It was a sorry display to witness from her colleague—or rather, her rival. But, this *was* someone capable of performing maintenance on my personal craft. I didn't want to think about what might happen if I was too cruel to Nias, so I figured it was best to treat her with some degree of kindness. And, honestly, I found her pitiable side almost endearing.

"Just a hundred ships."

At my words, Nias raised her head and grinned.

Eulisia, on the other hand, blurted, "Huh?" Her face clearly conveyed *"You're buying ships to please her?"*

"You really are wonderful, Lord Liam!"

I wasn't happy about Nias's effusive compliments. I liked people who flattered me, but if someone overdid it, their praise came off as mockery.

"Such a shame about you, really," I told her.

"Just because I complimented you?!"

Normally, such pleading wouldn't be enough to persuade me, but I didn't think of this as a huge expense. After all, I had a little something that made the cost of a hundred ships look like chump change. Well, maybe "chump change" was pushing it.

Seeing our conversation had reached a suitable conclusion, a commander stepped up to report to me. "Lord Liam, the enemy pirates have been wiped out."

"Good. Make sure you collect all the debris; I don't want any space trash polluting the neighborhood."

"Yes, sir."

With the battle won, I left the cleanup to my fleet and prepared to turn my vessel toward home.

***

Our fleet returned to a fortress that had been installed in space. It had been created using an asteroid that had already been mined for resources. At a glance, it looked like nothing more than a rock, but it had been hollowed out and equipped with all the necessary facilities of a permanent base. In addition to hosting accommodations for soldiers, it was also equipped for the resupply, maintenance, and even limited production of weapons. It was a true space fortress.

House Banfield had gained fortresses like this each time it had expanded its military. How many did it have now?

Waiting for me at that space fortress was my most trusted aide, Amagi. Her long, glossy black hair maintained its style even in the zero-gravity spaceport. The white lace headpiece and red ribbon tying up her ponytail looked perfect. Amagi stood at the head of a group of maids who'd come to welcome me. She was my ideal woman, her red eyes glittering beautifully.
I kicked off the ramp and glided through the weightless space to Amagi. The strange sensation was somewhere between flying and swimming. I shifted my body and pointed the soles of my feet at the floor. They were sucked down toward it, and I landed in front of Amagi. My feet were now magnetically rooted to the floor.
"Welcome back, Master." Amagi bowed, and all the identical-looking maids behind her bowed as well.
"You don't need to come out to greet me every time. I can come to you," I told her, but Amagi disagreed.
"Please understand your position, Master."
"I got it, I got it. You don't have to get mad."
"I am not angry."
All the maids apart from Amagi had the same face, but no one in this world would find that strange. The shoulders of Amagi's classic maid outfit were bare to display the label indicating that she wasn't human. It was a bit of an odd design, since the traditional uniform didn't show much skin but purposely bared the shoulders. The maids behind her all wore the same thing. The entire group was composed of maid robots—in other words, androids.
Amagi, the group's leader, was more advanced. The rest of them were mass-produced units, and they were all based off the same model, hence their identical appearance. The only thing that set them apart was their hairstyles—presumably a way for me to distinguish them. A few accessories bedecked the maids here and there.
Apparently, they were expressing some degree of individuality, though I hadn't ordered them to do so. I wondered if all androids did this. Sometimes they even swapped hairstyles and accessories. Was it their idea of a game?
If the maid robots enjoy fashion so much, maybe I should gift them some more accessories at some point. Wonder what they'd like?
I passed by Amagi, and the maids all followed me. As Amagi trailed behind at my side, I grumbled to her about my pirate hunting.
"There wasn't anything for me to do this time either. I was expecting more from this group, since I'd heard there were so many of them, but they were just more small fry."
When I complained that the pirates we'd fought today had bored me, Amagi manifested a number of small screens in the air. They were holographic monitors, displaying data on the pirates.
"Though you call them 'small fry,' they were a dangerous group with bounties on their heads," she informed me.
"*Those* weaklings?"

“If you report their defeat to the Empire, you should be able to earn a reward and another medal.”
The Empire liked it when you defeated pirates. They’d tell you “good job” and give you a meager reward and a medal, but I’d only appreciated that the first few times it happened. The more you do something, the less it appeals. At first I was proud of my accomplishments, but once you had a whole collection of medals, they didn’t seem all that impressive anymore. Plus, I’d just been having them shipped to me, since going all the way to the Capital Planet to receive them was just too much to go through.
“I don’t feel proud of squashing small fry. I hope the next ones provide a little more of a challenge.”
“I believe that will be unlikely.”
I stopped and studied Amagi’s face. It was expressionless as always; maid robots didn’t normally show emotion. Something about her made it seem as though she were worried about me, however.
“Why? They’re pirates, so they’ll show up and attack whether we like it or not, right?”
“You have defeated many pirates, so the gangs that still remain have started to avoid House Banfield territory.”
I was taken aback by those words. “They’ll stop coming? Why?”
“Because you are strong, and you show pirates no mercy.”
Pirates were a major source of income. If they stopped coming, that’d be a real problem for me. I was a noble, so I was the ruling lord of my domain, but I couldn’t act like I owned the place in other nobles’ territories. In other words, the only area where I could hunt pirates to my heart’s content was my own domain.
“In the area surrounding House Banfield’s domain, you are feared as ‘Liam the Pirate Hunter,’ Master.”
“This is a problem.” Now that I’d happily hunted so many of them down, the pirates were actively avoiding me.
“Normally, this would be something about which to rejoice.”
“Pirates are my wallet. I’m in trouble if they stop coming.”
“The domain’s economy has greatly improved. House Banfield will suffer no financial difficulties even if we do not defeat pirates.”
Until fairly recently, House Banfield’s finances had been in dire straits, since the previous lord and the lord before him—those absolutely useless slimeballs—had run their domain straight into ruin with their asinine policies. There’d already been evil lords here before I even reincarnated with the aim of becoming an evil lord myself.
I didn’t want to be an evil lord ruling over an already ruined territory; I wanted to enjoy the process of ruining it myself. Thus, I’d brought my planet and my subjects to prosperity. Maybe that was putting the cart before the horse, but what I wanted to do was exploit people, not rule over people who had already been exploited. There was nothing fun about being handed a domain that had already had all its vitality sucked out of it.

I arrived at a special section of the space fortress with Amagi and the other maids in tow. The only ones allowed to enter this area were me and whomever I personally granted permission. We passed through several security measures, then came to a place where the space junk—debris from our battles—was collected and stored. It was a huge chamber that had been filled with garbage, basically just a mountain of trash, yet I smiled before this debris.

“Another great haul today.”

From a pocket in my suit, I withdrew a device called the alchemy box, and I held it up. When I opened its lid, several holographic windows appeared around me.

“Well, what should I do with it all today?”

“I have a list prepared here.”

Amagi displayed the list for me, and I consulted it as I manipulated the alchemy box. With this device, I transformed matter into resources that my domain currently held in limited supply. If we needed more iron, I could just use the alchemy box to convert all this refuse into iron. With nothing more than this little box, I could make up for whatever my domain lacked.

I went through the list of resources we needed, and all the trash in the gratuitously large room was reduced to particles before my eyes. Then, they reformed, converted into different matter.

“All right, that should do it for this room.”

Confirming that I’d finished converting everything, I headed for the next room. After a battle, there was just too much space junk. When you tried to collect it all, you ended up with an almost unmanageable amount. If I made efficient use of it, however, I could obtain all the resources I required. If I ended up with an excess of resources, I could sell them off. In fact, I’d been doing this a lot lately, raking in hefty profits for House Banfield.

As I walked along, Amagi cautioned me, “The next room contains hazardous materials, so please do not forget to wear protective clothing.”

“Ahh, just by rounding up garbage nobody else wants to deal with, I make a tidy little profit. This alchemy box is really something else.”

We collected a fee for disposing of dangerous waste. We earned money just for taking care of trash, and then earned even more from selling off that reconfigured trash. I couldn’t help snickering every time I thought about it.

Of course, I wasn’t completely without worries.

“Incidentally, Amagi, I have a question.”

“What would that be?”

“I could easily repay House Banfield’s debts at this point, couldn’t I? I’d like to be free of my obligations at some point.”

Ever since I’d obtained the alchemy box, House Banfield’s profits were about thirty times higher than they’d been before. I could pay off the debts my parents and grandparents—House Banfield’s previous nobles—had amassed whenever I wanted to, but Amagi had never suggested doing so. In fact, she’d stopped me from doing so before.

“If you repay such a massive debt all at once, it will be obvious that you have obtained a vast fortune. I believe it would not be beneficial for people to learn of the existence of the alchemy box.”
“So I can’t do it yet, eh? Feels pretty bad to still be in debt…”
“Please endure.”
The alchemy box was a tool developed by an intergalactic nation that had existed long ago, before the establishment of the Empire. Since an ancient society had created it, its method of manufacturing had been lost, and thus it was very valuable. In other words, if the existence of this box became widely known, people might covet it so badly that they’d try to kill me for it.
I was stronger now than I had been in my past life. I’d learned an amazing sword style called the Way of the Flash, and pirates posed no danger to me anymore, yet I was still far from invincible.
“Yeah, guess I’ll deal with it for now.”
I’d gone to the trouble of setting up a dummy corporation to help disguise the profits I made from the alchemy box, and I was doing a lot of mining, passing off the material I converted with the device as resources obtained in the mines. Really, I was almost going through *too* much trouble to mask things.
“It would be best for the alchemy box to remain a secret. Besides, there is something else you should be prioritizing, Master, is there not?”
“Oh…that.”
Right now, I was supposed to prioritize my education. It was a process all Imperial noble children had to go through to be acknowledged as adults involving a long period of training. If I only lived as long as I had in my previous life, I’d have spent half of my lifetime on this pursuit.
“What a bother,” I griped.
“It is an unavoidable step on your journey if you are to be acknowledged as a proper Imperial noble.”
“I understand that, but why does it have to start in some other guy’s territory? I don’t get the logic there.”
The first stage of my coming-of-age training involved staying with another noble family. I didn’t know what good that would do me, but it was just how things were done here, so there wasn’t any point in making a fuss about it. I didn’t have the sort of standing that would allow me to refuse, and I didn’t want the trouble refusing would generate, anyway.
But there was one big problem with this.
“By the way, has the house I’ll be studying at been decided? The last time I asked, you said you hadn’t found one yet.”
Usually, Amagi responded to my questions instantly, but this time, she paused for a moment before speaking. She was probably doing some sophisticated processing with that android brain of hers.
“Coordination is ongoing.”
So she hadn’t found a house that would take me in yet. I supposed that this was thanks to my parents’ shoddy legacy. Because of their bad reputation,

there weren't any houses that wanted to take me in. If I could just go anywhere, I'd already be on my way, but the stain on House Banfield had isolated us from noble society. In addition to learning the ins and outs of being a lord, I'd want to build relationships with other houses while in another noble's domain.

Well, at least Amagi and my butler Brian still seemed passionate about it.

"Just find some random house. There's no point making a big deal about it."

"Brian is handling this right now. It should not take much longer."

Will I really receive the training I need? Well, I don't care where I go, so I guess I'll just try to be optimistic. If I had a choice, though, I'd like to learn some things from an evil lord… That'd be best for me, since I plan on becoming one myself. A good lord would hardly be a valuable example for me.

"I know—maybe I'll pray to *that* guy. Or just ask him, I guess," I muttered.

Amagi cocked her head. "Is something the matter, Master?"

"It's nothing."

"I see. By the way…" Amagi changed the subject, much to my chagrin. "Master, you intend to make more weapons purchases? I received notices from the Third and Seventh Weapons Factories."

I hastily averted my eyes from Amagi. "Th-that's fine, isn't it?"

In truth, I had ordered battleships and mobile knights without telling her. I felt like a boy being scolded by his mother for buying toys without permission.

"I could not forbid you from doing so, but we already have a plan for military expansion. Unscheduled purchases of state-of-the-art weapons disrupt that plan."

"Well, just switch the new stuff for used ones, then."

"That will also take some effort. Please refrain next time."

"I got it. I can at least buy what I said I was gonna, though, right? Right? It won't look good if I go back and tell them I changed my mind."

Amagi still wore no expression on her face, but she emanated an aura of *"What am I going to do with you?"*

"Yes, but again, please do not make further purchases outside of the bounds of our plans, Master." Clearly, I'd convinced her.

"I'll be careful from now on."

Yes! Now I don't have to back down from what I promised earlier. That would have been real pathetic. I have to protect my dignity as an evil lord.

Well, perhaps it was a little pathetic that Amagi was managing my weapons purchases in the first place.

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On House Banfield's home planet, there was a mansion so large that it could've contained a whole city. The mansion was practically a city in itself, in fact, and belonged to the count—me.

After squashing those space pirates, I returned to this mansion, where I set about doing some work in my office with Amagi by my side. Seated at my desk, I pored over electronic documents. I might have looked like a teenager, but as the reigning lord, I always had plenty of work to do.
When I'd completed the matters at hand and stretched, Amagi addressed me.
"Well done, Master. That is all your work for this morning."
"I got done quicker than I expected."
"You finished twenty-four minutes ahead of schedule. It is a clear indication of your improvement in productivity."
"Well, I'm definitely getting better at this kind of stuff."
It wasn't my past life as a pencil-pusher that enabled me to tackle these responsibilities; in fact, my past-life knowledge was practically useless here. No, it was thanks to what I'd learned in my education capsule.
In this world, such devices would install knowledge directly into your brain, the amount depending on whether you spent a few months or years inside them. Education capsules even strengthened your body as well.
Once you exited the capsule, you had to be careful. Not only did you need some physical rehabilitation, but if you didn't utilize the knowledge you'd acquired, you'd lose it. It was important to reinforce the knowledge through use. It would be like carrying around a dictionary: if you didn't open it, it would be useless.
Still, it was a lot more efficient than education in my past life, and it took far less time. With all the knowledge I'd "downloaded," I could do my work as lord; it wasn't due to some special talent or anything.
"Your improvement is due to your diligent work every day," Amagi encouraged me. Maybe she was concerned because I was feeling a little pathetic.
"Never mind that. Anyone could do this much if they used an education capsule."
"According to available data, it is my judgment that your current capabilities are far above average."
"Well, if your data says so, that makes me feel a little better."
After all this effort, I could only claim to be "above average." I'd spent money and used an education capsule several times, and I worked every day, but I still wasn't any better than that. I'd no doubt be achieving more if I were an actual genius.
Just when I was about to take an early break, someone requested entrance to my office. I granted permission, and my butler, Brian Beaumont, entered. He was slender, dressed in a handsome tailcoat, with swept-back gray hair. He looked as if he were only approaching his golden years, but with the anti-aging technology available in this world, that meant he was actually of a rather incredible age. Brian had been working for House Banfield since before I was born. He stood before me now with a kind smile on his face.

“Great news, Master Liam! We’ve made the arrangements for your noble training!”
It seemed that Brian had finally found a house that would take me in. From how happy he looked, it must have been a good house too.
“I see. So where is it?” I asked as I spun my still-childlike body around in my chair.
I could see Brian’s shoulders sag with disappointment at my attitude. “You don’t appear very interested.”
Of course I’m not going to be interested in studying at some other noble’s house. “I have to say, it doesn’t sound very appealing. What do I have to train for? I mean, it’s just going over to someone else’s house and living there in luxury, right? It’s basically a vacation.”
All you needed was to be able to say you had gone to train with someone. It just seemed like a custom for strengthening the bonds between different houses.
Brian tried to deepen my understanding of the convention. “That’s not true. The house you’ll be staying with for your training is quite a popular one, Master Liam. From what I hear, you will be able to receive proper instruction there.”
“It doesn’t make a difference where I go. Pay them enough money, and they’ll happily take me in and entertain me. Well, it won’t be very comfortable living in someone else’s domain, but I’ll bear with it for three years.”
This training in name only had to be endured for at least three years, so I would be at the mercy of another house for that time period. The only question was what kind of place this other planet would be.
“So? What sort of house will I be staying with?”
Brian presented me with some files. “You’ll be staying in the domain of House Razel. It is a very popular location for young nobles to study, and they accept dozens of students each year. The viscount owns a number of planets and asteroids with plentiful resources, and his domain produces a vast amount of processed metals for export.”
According to Brian’s explanation, the Razels were wealthy, but the house’s territory was surrounded by other families’ domains, so it had no potential for further expansion. Since expansion would be difficult, the lord struggled with ascending beyond viscount status.
“A house that can’t grow any further, eh? Meanwhile, we’ve just started expanding our own territory.” I shot a look at Amagi, who nodded. She seemed to catch my meaning.
“Yes. House Banfield’s territory is vast, with much potential for expansion. We possess several habitable planets, but since they have been untouched until now, they need to be developed.”
Until recently I had only focused on developing my home planet, but now that I had more funds, I was starting to look into other planets as well. I’d

already moved some settlers to one of them, who'd begun making it into a habitable colony. I was grateful for all the extra cash.
"We're going to keep working at developing my domain. As for Viscount Razel… I'm looking forward to what sort of welcome he'll show me."
"You should make use of the education capsule once more before then," Amagi suggested.
"I have to sleep for a while *again*?"
"Only a short period this time. You may leave everything to me while you sleep, Master."
Well, I didn't want to bring any more shame on my house during my training, so I decided to go along with her suggestion. "All right, I'll entrust operations to you, Amagi."
I was confident operations would be fine if Amagi handled them, but Brian looked a little forlorn.
"You have something to say, Brian?"
"Master Liam, you could rely on *me* a little too, couldn't you?"
What's this geezer getting all emotional for?
"You can just be quiet and do your job."
Brian sulked. "So cold, Master Liam…"

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In the next room, a man had been listening in on Liam's conversation with his personal assistants. He wore a striped tailcoat and a top hat that concealed his eyes, and he carried a traveling bag in one hand. This suspicious-looking man called himself "the Guide."
This Guide was the supernatural entity who had reincarnated Liam into this world. He was not a well-meaning creature, however, despite how he'd presented himself. In fact, he was more like an incarnation of evil. He thrived on negative emotions, and to that end, he sent people's lives spiraling into darkness with a smile on his face.
Liam's suffering in his past life had all been the Guide's doing. The Guide's string-pulling had culminated in Liam's betrayal and his lonely, miserable death. However, Liam knew nothing about any of that and in fact felt grateful to the Guide, considering him a savior who'd made his second life possible.
As for the Guide, he was tormented by Liam's feelings of gratitude. He had been so weakened by them that he could no longer summon the full extent of his powers. On top of that, he'd become so frightened by the boy that he was forced to hide in the next room when eavesdropping, hoping to avoid detection.
Upon hearing that Liam was about to go study with another noble family, however, the Guide came up with a brand-new scheme, and the corners of his lips turned up in a crescent-moon smile.
"This is my chance."

Though he was smiling, he clutched his chest in agony. Liam's gratitude rippled through him, making him physically ill. Headache, nausea, dizziness, palpitations, shortness of breath… If negative emotions were a sumptuous feast for the Guide, then positive feelings, like gratitude, were poison to him.

Previously, he would cross between worlds and do as he pleased. He got his kicks from making numerous people unhappy. By now, though, he had lost most of his power and could no longer move between worlds. All he could do was wait for his chance to gain his power back—to enact revenge against Liam. That revenge wouldn't be fulfilled until he had plunged Liam into despair and consumed his negative emotions. Yet the Guide had a serious obstacle in moving forward.

"I have this chance, but I still can't push myself right now. Damn it, Liam, why do I have to feel so miserable, all because of you?"

With his strength so compromised, the Guide couldn't exert much energy into making Liam suffer. He could pull off little more than pranks now. Still, the Guide wouldn't give up.

"There must be a way. I *will* have my vengeance, Liam!"

The Guide put his ear back to the wall, again listening in on Liam's conversation, his wicked hunger for revenge burning inside him. They were discussing House Razel, where Liam would be going for his noble training.

"Hmm, so Liam will be leaving his domain. If I'm going to interfere, perhaps I should do it there instead of his home turf." The Guide considered his options, muttering to himself. "Yes! I'll head to Viscount Razel's before he even gets there. I hope you're ready, Liam—I'll make you unhappy this time for sure!"

And hopefully finish you off there, the Guide thought as he floated upward and passed through the ceiling.

From the shadows, a small white light observed the Guide as he departed. This light hovered in the air, glaring up at the ceiling where the Guide had passed through.

In its shape, it resembled a dog.

Chapter 1:
Viscount Razel

ON HIS HOME PLANET, Viscount Randolph Sera Razel had gathered his vassals in a large meeting room. They were seated around a long table, though some of them attended remotely.

Going over some data in a particularly fancy chair was Viscount Razel, a man with a fox-like face and swept-back brown hair. He was of average height, and he wore an expensive suit on his slender frame. There was something untrustworthy in his features.

The topic of this meeting was the next batch of noble children who would be studying under the family. The viscount was looking over the names of the people who would be coming to stay in his territory next year, and the year after that. The holographic data in the air before him contained an extensive list of the money and resources each child's family would be sending with them. To Viscount Razel, accepting children for education and training was in part to strengthen relationships between families, but it was also a business consideration.

"Not a great crop next year. It won't be worth establishing long-lasting relations with many of these houses."

The viscount didn't consider the potential of the children he was taking in; all he cared about was how powerful each child's family was. His vassals were of the same mind.

"That baron's house is out of the question."

"This house is on the decline. I might suggest rejecting the application."

"That one viscount family is promising, Lord Randolph. Looks like they're making a nice profit through trade."

Only rarely did the children themselves enter into the conversation.

"Lord Randolph, the first son of House Exner will be coming the year after next," a knight announced. "They've included plenty of gifts with the application. The boy seems talented as well."

When Viscount Razel looked at the family's data, however, he was uninterested. The head of the family was a baron, but they were clearly new money, and Viscount Razel didn't like that.

"Upstarts like them aren't worth forming relationships with."

The knight wouldn't back down, though, being very interested in this boy who would succeed Baron Exner. The heir showed much promise. "If I may, my lord, the future Baron Exner looks quite capable. I believe he could become quite distinguished in the future."

"I can worry about that if and when it happens. The children's abilities aren't important; it's all about the connections between our families. The family's strength is the only thing that matters."

The children’s abilities didn’t matter, no—yet he happily praised and invited any whose poor families labored to build up their own fortunes and offer him sufficient gifts.
As they discussed their plans in the meeting room, a man slid directly through the wall and appeared inside. It was the Guide. Neither Viscount Razel nor any of his men noticed the mysterious being. He walked through the room and took a peek at the documents the men were examining. At that very moment, they happened to be going over Liam’s data.
“Hee hee… Hee hee hee hee!”
The Guide peered down at Liam’s information. The report detailed how House Banfield had quickly built up a vast amount of resources and capital. When he’d first viewed these numbers, Viscount Razel had been only too happy to take Liam in.
“At last, the time for my revenge has come! Liam, now you’ll finally experience my malice!”
He touched the report displayed in the air, trying to manipulate the information it contained, but he only produced a feeble spark, and his tampering was rejected. He was far too weak.
“Curses! Then I’ll just do this…and this!”
The Guide did his best to change just the numbers. But he couldn’t muster the strength to alter a digit or two in the digital display, let alone meddle in Liam’s greater affairs. While he struggled, the meeting went on without him.
“This is all Liam’s fault!” the Guide moaned. “It’s so pathetic that I’ve been reduced to petty tricks!”
As he stewed in frustration, the Guide noticed the name “Peter Sera Petack” in the data.
“Oh? Well, now, this is an interesting fellow.”
He saw in the data that Peter was a count just like Liam, but his reputation was the exact opposite. The economy of Peter’s domain was suffering, and he had massive debts that he wasn’t repaying. House Petack’s resemblance to House Banfield before Liam’s takeover piqued the Guide’s curiosity.
“Let’s see if I can switch the data…”
At last, the Guide was successful. He swapped the report details for House Banfield and House Petack, making it so that the former appeared to be a ruined family devoid of any merit and the latter a wealthy, up-and-coming house.
When they looked closer at Liam’s information, Viscount Razel and his men were disgusted by the state of the Banfield family. His reputation had plummeted in an instant.
“This is terrible.” Viscount Razel massaged his eyes, as if questioning his vision.
One of his vassals spoke up then, disparaging House Banfield. “There’s always one of these every year. They throw their weight around without

knowing their place, trying to establish a relationship with the noble House Razel. Would you like us to reject the application, Lord Randolph?"
"No, we've already informed House Banfield of our approval, and the compensation's been received. If we deny him now, it'll just sully our reputation. So we'll take him…but he'll receive only the treatment his low standing demands."
"Yes, sir."
House Razel did not bother giving a warm welcome to the children of families it did not consider worth fostering long-term relationships with. As far as House Razel was concerned, these families should be grateful their children were taken in at all for training, even if their treatment was harsh.
"Our family does make a profit off idiots like this, so they're not entirely without worth." Viscount Razel smirked, and several of his vassals sneered in kind. Seeing this, the more principled vassals grimaced.
Liam had been honored with a medal on the Capital Planet for his vanquishing of pirates, but since the Empire was so vast, wide circulation of such information was hardly instant. Plenty of people received medals on the Capital Planet, so there was no way to recount them all.
Thus, Viscount Razel understandably wasn't familiar with Liam's name, nickname, or achievements. His territory was far away, and the viscount didn't have much interest in such accolades in the first place. Just as Liam knew nothing about House Razel, House Razel had no interest in House Banfield.
The Guide burst out laughing, clutching his stomach. "This is your once-in-a-lifetime training—you've got to enjoy it! Ah, I should make some more arrangements. I'll have to build up some strength for a while."
When the Guide slipped through the wall of the meeting room and left, Randolph and his men lost interest in Liam and moved on to the data of another child: the boy of House Petack.
"Th-this is amazing!"
"House Petack appears to have quite the momentum right now."
"A truly appealing family. Your thoughts, Lord Randolph?"
"Wonderful!" Viscount Razel was clearly impressed. "Now, House *Petack* is a worthy connection. I'll have to think about arranging my daughter's marriage to this boy as well."
Due to the Guide's meddling, House Petack seemed extraordinary compared to House Banfield. Viscount Razel immediately coveted a relationship with the family, blissfully ignorant of the false attribution.
"I can hardly wait for next year's batch."
Viscount Razel's fox-like face twisted into an excited grin.

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My life grew even busier after it was officially decided where I would be studying. I would leave my domain for three years to stay with House Razel. Before my departure, many people came to meet with me.

One of them was my personal merchant, Thomas Henfrey. A plump, mild-mannered man, Thomas was the head of the Henfrey Company, traders who traveled the stars. He looked like the sort of kind old man you'd see anywhere, but on the inside, he was a crafty merchant.

"Where's your usual gift, Thomas?" I urged him, and as part of our age-old routine, Thomas brought out a package.

"I have it right here."

"I knew I could count on you!"

I accepted the package of "yellow sweets"—a bribe. He'd once again brought me gold to remain on my good side.

In my old life, gold was a symbol of wealth. Perhaps I had a nouveau riche attitude, but to me, gold was a symbol of success. In this fantastical world, there were metals like mithril and adamantite that had more worth than gold. I knew this, but I still preferred gold. I could only think of other prized metals as materials for arms and armor. It made more sense to utilize those metals than display them.

As I marveled at my gold, Thomas made a bit of small talk before moving on to business. "I heard you've decided where you're going to study, Lord Liam. That's wonderful."

"I can't say I'm looking forward to it, myself, after hearing what it's really about. I mean, it's just taking in the children of other nobles so houses can cozy up together, right? I'm basically just going to play around there."

I set the gold down and leaned back against the couch cushions. Since I was so disinterested in the topic, Thomas didn't seem quite sure how to proceed.

"You don't wish to study under another noble, Lord Liam?"

Typically, the children taken in for training were treated very well, but the "training" they received was not particularly stringent. If fostering relationships was more important than actual learning, then it was training in name only, with more of a focus on socializing.

"If I'm just going to be fooling around for three years, I could do the same thing here. I know complaining won't change anything, though, so I'll get through it."

I didn't care about the schooling, but since my future relationships as a lord were on the line, I couldn't be too cavalier about it. I'd decided to play nice for my three years of noble schmoozing.

"I don't think you need to be concerned about the quality of your training. I hear where you're going is a very popular spot for training."

"I can hope so, at least."

My current goal was to finish my training and my education as quickly as possible. This three-year foray to another domain wouldn't be the end of it, though—my little "study-abroad program" was just the start of a lifetime of work.

“Do you have any idea what sort of family House Razel is, my lord?” Thomas asked me.
I understood why he knew so little. The viscount’s domain was quite far from here, especially considering the scale of the intergalactic empire. In terms of geography from my previous life, House Razel’s domain was like a faraway prefecture—not quite another country, but still possessing its own unique identity. A distant, different region in my eyes.
“Not beyond the basics, really. Seems they’ve only got one habitable world, but they do control several mining planets. All I know is that House Razel’s domain is a popular place to study, they make most of their money from mining, and their military strength isn’t that impressive.”
Their economy flourished due to their mining operations. They didn’t have much in the way of personal military force, but because of their bonds with other noble families, their standing was higher than House Banfield’s. Having lots of noble friends was its own kind of power—one of the reasons why I had to improve my own isolated domain. To that end, playing nice with the other nobles would be far more important than studying.
Thomas nodded. “Since you’re working to improve your military, it makes sense that Viscount Razel would want to join forces with you. You might even expect talk of marriage.”
“He’s got a daughter about my age, but I can’t say I’m very interested.”
Viscount Razel apparently had many daughters in addition to his heir. From what I’d heard, offering up his daughters for marriage was another means by which he established relationships with other houses. So were his daughters just tools to him?
At this, Thomas shot me a puzzled look. “This is a perfect opportunity for House Banfield to foster a relationship with another family, is it not?”
“I guess so. Well, I’ll be civil. I can do that, at least.”
“Erm, right.” The merchant seemed unsettled by my attitude.
I had to admit, I was a *little* curious about House Razel, what with its good reputation and all. I’d made sure to send them plenty of gifts, so I expected a warm welcome.
“When does your stay with House Razel begin, my lord?”
“Two years from now.”
“You’ll be…fifty-five, then.”
A homestay at the age of fifty-five would have been unthinkable in my past life. This world with its long life spans really threw my conception of time out of whack.
Our chat must’ve triggered a memory because Thomas suddenly brought up a particular female knight in my employ. “Speaking of—Lady Christiana has already begun training to gain her proper credentials as a knight, has she not?”
Christiana Leta Rosebreia was a candidate to serve my family as a knight of the Empire, but she’d recently left my domain in order to earn her qualifications. To become an Imperial knight, one had to graduate from two

designated schools, one of them being a military academy. It was the same for nobility, so I'd be attending the same schools in the future. After that came more training to put your knowledge and skills into practice, so becoming a knight took decades of hard work.

Christiana—or Tia, as I called her—was enrolled in a school on the Algrand Empire's home planet, where she was studying with some other knight candidates. The lot of them had been knights of another nation before their abduction by space pirates and subsequent rescue. In their home nation, they'd apparently been esteemed as talented warriors, but they couldn't become knights of the Algrand Empire without first going through the Empire's own qualification process, hence their absence.

"I've sent her to school with the others. I think she should be done with her training by the time I'm back from Viscount Razel's."

Tia would be in school for six years, and then she'd have to train as a government official for two. After that, she'd be looking at a further four-plus years of training—twelve whole years just for what could be considered the equivalent of a college education. In this world, where people's lifespans were so long, compulsory education was drawn out to match. And this was just the bare minimum; without money and backing, the process could take decades. Thankfully, Tia, her colleagues, and I didn't have to worry about that.

Still, I had plenty of training waiting for me—my stay with Viscount Razel was just the tip of the iceberg. Tia and the knight candidates wouldn't bear the same burden.

"I'm jealous of the people who can get this done in only twenty-four years," I muttered.

Thomas smiled awkwardly, and our talk finally moved to business.

***

Tia—the subject of Liam's and Thomas's conversation—was currently attending the hardest university to get into on the Imperial Home Planet. Tia was extremely capable, and she stood out even among the rest of Liam's knight candidates. She already showed enough promise to vie for the position of head knight, leader of House Banfield's entire knight regiment. Tia had her eye on the prize.

Despite her capabilities, Tia had been captured by a space pirate named Goaz and subjected to unthinkable horrors. Her body had been mutilated, and she'd been forced to spend each day in hellish despair. To this day, she hesitated to speak about her cruel treatment. Then, one day, Liam swooped in, defeated Goaz, and saved Tia and the other captives. Feeling indebted to him, they all pledged to become his knights.

In the past, Tia had been something of a legend known and respected as "the Princess Knight." Had she not been betrayed by her comrades and

tricked by the cowardly Goaz, she never would've made it to Liam's domain and sought to be his blade.
Tia was currently seated in a café near her university with two other knight candidates, discussing the location of Liam's impending training. It had taken ages to find him a place to study, so the three ladies were overjoyed. To anyone passing by, they must've looked like three normal female students having a carefree chat.
"It's wonderful that Lord Liam has finally found a noble house to take him in!" Tia was saying, a big smile on her face. "But as for those other houses, the ones who turned him down in ignorance… Oh, what I'd like do to them!"
With her long, glossy blonde hair that always seemed to sparkle and her gemlike green eyes, Tia drew the eyes of any passing man. However, her angelic appearance, which hardly seemed suitable for a warrior, blatantly clashed with her boorish and aggressive manner. In fact, she was a fierce enough fighter to kill most men in an instant. Tia was skilled, smart, and above all else, completely devoted to Liam. In other words, she was the ideal knight.
Her two companions, devoted and talented in their own rights, nodded emphatically in agreement.
"Right? Normally, you'd never think they'd turn him down!" said one.
"Normally, they'd prostrate themselves and beg him to come!" added the other.
These women were not joking; they were seriously displeased with Liam's treatment. After he rescued them, they'd become extremely loyal to him. They admired him so much that, in their eyes, the *normal* thing would be for a noble to plead for Liam to come study under their house.
Tia closed her eyes, hands on her reddened cheeks. The gesture made her look like a blushing maiden, but on the inside, she was still a fearsome warrior.
"I should return to see Lord Liam after my training is complete. Then I'll be able to welcome him back from *his* schooling…"
Even now, Tia could hardly wait for that moment.

***

Before I knew it, it was time for me to head to House Razel.
Having embarked from House Banfield in a fleet of three hundred ships, I now approached Viscount Razel's home planet. Apparently, it was too threatening to approach another lord's home planet with a huge armada, so I'd brought along a small force instead. I would've loved to roll up in a fleet of ten thousand to show off my military might, so I was feeling pretty bummed about this.
Much to my disappointment, my superdreadnought hadn't come in time either. I ordered it from the Third Weapons Factory, but I'd made so many demands that the construction was heavily delayed.

“I wanted to come on my superdreadnought,” I griped. “It’ll really be something else. How long was it gonna be again?”
My personal chambers on my flagship were so lavish, it was hard to believe they existed on a battleship. I’d had the original commander’s quarters modified just for me, though I realized it was a huge waste with space being so limited inside a ship.
Standing beside me, Amagi answered my question in her emotionless manner. “The vessel you have ordered from the Third Weapons Factory is a three-thousand-meter-class ship. To answer your question concisely, the ship will be three kilometers long. Most superdreadnoughts are around one thousand meters in length, Master. Yours will be three times that size.”
Though she showed no expression, I got the impression that Amagi was angry with me. Well, I *did* have a ship built three times as large as the huge one-kilometer model. It had taken three times the funds too. Actually, no, it’d cost nine times our original estimate.
Brian, who had also come to see me off, gave me an accusatory look. “You were too greedy. A normal one-thousand-meter class would have been fine, but you had to go and order a three-thousand-meter class all on your own, Master Liam.”
I’d wanted to show off, and a massive battleship like that was something straight out of a man’s wildest fantasies. I’d figured I was entitled to it, but now I did secretly regret the decision somewhat.
“I wanted it. Lay off.”
“You know, *we’re* the ones who have to figure out the facilities and the personnel needed to maintain a ridiculously huge ship like that. You’re only causing problems for us to deal with while you’re gone, Master Liam.”
Brian and Amagi were both mad at me for going off to fulfill my training and leaving them with this burden. *If it were anyone but you two, I’d have them arrested on the spot just for talking back to me!* Unable to punish Amagi or Brian for their insolence, I sullenly averted my eyes.
Upon seeing my attitude, Amagi said dispassionately, “The fact of the matter is that you will often be away from your domain in the future, Master. I see nothing wrong with having a flagship prepared, but there was no reason to be so heavily involved in its design process. Is it not likely that you will be constructing another superdreadnought once your training period is over?”
Since my money problems were taken care of, I’d gone a little overboard with my spending in favor of extravagance. I still wasn’t in any financial distress, though. My pocket money was far from stagnating—in fact, the numbers were steadily ticking up. I just found it annoying to have to finance the ship’s ongoing maintenance and personnel, since that wasn’t something I could just solve in one big purchase.
“I’ll be more careful in the future, so just let me get away with this one,” I said. “Anyway, when you come pick me up from school, come in the superdreadnought. I’ll want to flaunt it to everyone.”

Brian shook his head as if I were just a little kid who wanted to boast about his new toy. At the same time, he seemed almost relieved. “It’s a bit troubling that the thing you’re most proud of is a superdreadnought, but I believe it’s healthy for a boy your age to show off a little.”
“Hey now, stop acting like I’m a kid.”
While I was enjoying this banter, Amagi announced, “We have reached our destination.”
She called up screens to show me the view outside. Numerous fleets carrying the youths who would be studying on House Razel’s home planet were converging on this point in space. The spaceport was swarming with battleships, each carrying a young noble like me on their way to House Razel for their training.
“So this is where I’ll be spending the next three years.” I gazed at the 3D image of the planet projected before me.
Brian straightened his posture, ready to fuss. “Please be on alert for injury and illness, Master Liam. If anything happens, I trust you will contact us immediately. Understood?”
“Yeah, yeah,” I responded, tired of hearing the same thing over and over again. It ruffled his feathers a little.
Amagi expressed concern for me too. “Please return safely, Master.”
“Eh, this is practically a vacation. What’s going to happen to me? I’ll just do what I can to enjoy it, I guess. I’ll leave the stuff back home to you.”
“Very well.”
I was sure to receive a warm welcome from House Razel. I mean, I’d paid them ten times the standard fee for my stay to make sure of it. I was looking forward to seeing exactly how they would entertain me.
Meanwhile, Brian had begun crying. “I’m so happy to see that you’ve grown up to be such a fine young man.”
This guy’s always crying. I wish he’d knock that off. What the heck am I supposed to do every time this old dude starts with the waterworks?!
“Will you stop crying?”
“How can I not? You’ve finally started your training, and the day that you become a proper count is nearer than ever! I’m so delighted, I can’t stop my tears from flowing!”
“Riiight.” I stared at him, dumbfounded.
“Brian is more nervous than you are, Master,” Amagi chimed in. “He has prepared many gifts for House Razel since it was decided that you would be studying there. He even sent his prized bonsai tree, which won a competition.”
“You sent your prized bonsai?!”
Brian wiped his tears with his handkerchief. “It was the finest item I could offer, so I had little choice.”
Bonsai was one of Brian’s hobbies, and since he’d been practicing it for hundreds of years, it was natural that he would win a contest. I knew he had treasured that plant. It was the sort of thing that someone with a trained

eye could tell was valuable, and I wished he hadn't given it away like that for my sake.
"That's heavy, man. Well, why don't you relax about things a little, now? It's just noble schooling…"
Brian must not have wanted me to be treated as a lesser noble and was doing what he could to help.
"Are you not taking this too lightly, Master Liam? I'm starting to worry."
"It's fine. I found plenty of excuses to send them money and gifts. Even the most upstanding noble's gotta cave after all that."
I'd made sure to personally send House Razel plenty of money in addition to the official gifts from my house. In other words, the viscount had accepted some pretty hefty bribes from me.
"That may be a problem. After all, you're here to learn what it takes to be a proper noble lord."
"I don't think that'll be necessary."
Even a good person could be won over with money; that was just the way the cookie crumbled. I was sure these people would let me get away with anything. Besides, I had interest in a lord who would happily accept my money. Maybe we could get along well, one evil lord to another. Whatever the case, unless the lord was so sanctimonious that he would never be swayed by money, he'd have no choice but to treat me well.
"Anyway, I look forward to seeing how House Razel receives me."
A smile came to my lips as I imagined the stay ahead.

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Viscount Razel's spaceport was full of battleships from young nobles who'd come for their training. Representatives from multiple houses filed through the port, each bearing gifts for Viscount Razel. These gifts were separate from the tuition fees, but they symbolized the families' gratitude for their children's acceptance. Among all these items were the gifts sent by House Banfield, prepared for Liam's sake by Amagi and Brian, which they had procured through the Henfrey Company. They had also provided resources that Viscount Razel desired, and the resulting heap in one of House Razel's storerooms looked like a mountain of treasure.
All the workers were amazed.
"This is the first time one family has sent this much, isn't it?"
"Did you see the fleet that delivered it? Those ships looked cutting edge."
"Man…House Petack sure is something!"
All the containers were marked with the crest of House Banfield, but neither the workers nor their superiors recognized it as such. The Guide stood among them, desperately working to distort their perception.
"All right, finished here too. Hee hee hee… Liam, all the goods you sent will be treated as someone else's! Everything you've done is pointless!"

The Guide was continuing his secret work, doing whatever he could to chip away at Liam's happiness. Right now, that involved swapping people's recognition of the Petack and Banfield family crests.

"By the way, did you hear?" one of the workers grumbled. "Those country bumpkins, House Banfield, came with thousands of ships."

"That's the problem with these know-nothings. Peasants didn't even send a single gift. Don't they have any manners?"

"Yeah, and they're making House Razel deal with the resupplying and maintenance of all those ships. Why'd the viscount accept such an idiot?"

It was impolite to approach another noble's home planet with a large fleet, which meant House Petack—or "House Banfield," rather—was leaving a poor impression on House Razel. Liam hadn't made a single misstep, but the Guide had swooped in and completely trashed his reputation.

As the workers complained, the next container was brought in.

"Next is…Baron Berman? Haven't heard of this one either."

The name wasn't local or familiar to the Razel employees.

One of the senior workers clapped his hands, spurring the others. "Come on, let's get this done with already!"

As time went on, more and more containers were delivered.

Chapter 2:
Training Begins

A WELCOME MOOD settled over Viscount Razel's spaceport. The viscount himself had come to greet his new charges, and in addition to knights and military officers, various other officials and persons of authority were in attendance.

One of the people they were all there to meet was the heir to Count Petack's family. A door opened, and Peter Sera Petack appeared, dressed in rather gaudy clothes. The outfit, laden with ornamentation, could hardly be considered appropriate for a meeting with Viscount Razel. What stood out the most about him was his pink hair, styled into spikes. He was deeply tanned, wore loud makeup, and his body was so thin that it was clear he neglected his physique. One had to wonder if he really *was* the heir to a prominent noble house.

"Hmmmm?" Peter said in greeting, his words drawn out and dramatic. "So you're Viscount Razel? I do hope you'll take good care of me."

He was treating the viscount as if they were close friends, but that wasn't enough to anger Razel. The boy's attitude did annoy him, but he wouldn't let it show.

Even if he is a bit of an idiot, I have to think about our future relations, he thought. I can use him to benefit House Razel.

The viscount welcomed the boy with a sunny smile that masked his ulterior motives. "Glad to have you, Peter. It's wonderful to meet you. Now, I'm sure you're tired from your journey, so I suggest you get some rest. We'll be having a welcome party for you tomorrow, and I hope you'll enjoy it."

The boy was supposed to be here for training, but here they were throwing a party for him, and the viscount had extended an invitation to him personally. Peter was receiving a very warm welcome indeed, but he didn't seem particularly impressed. On the contrary, he acted as though such treatment were only natural.

"Very well, then why don't you show me to my *room* already? I'm tired, so I'd like to hurry up and rest."

Both the people there to greet him and the vassals who had escorted him went pale at his attitude, but Viscount Razel didn't scold the boy for it. The boy's family had sent him an abundance of gifts; this immense amount of money and mountain of resources had made the viscount incredibly tolerant.

"I'm terribly sorry about that, but I hope you'll allow my lovely daughter to show you around tomorrow."

This was a hint that the viscount was offering Peter his daughter's hand in marriage. Even if there was nothing commendable about Peter's personal talents or disposition, the viscount had his heart set on building a strong

connection to the Petack family. For that reason, Viscount Razel had arranged to have his daughter stick close to Peter on a daily basis. It wasn't uncommon in the Empire for political marriages to be arranged in such a way during a youth's training, yet Peter didn't seem to realize that was the intention.

"Fine by me. Would you say your daughter's a *beauuuty*, Viscount?"

Everyone around them—not only the viscount's vassals, but House Petack's people as well—was plainly astounded. However, Viscount Razel simply laughed. "Well, I am somewhat biased, but she is my beautiful pride and joy."

If this is all there is to him, even my daughter should be able to manipulate him easily enough.

The boy himself was trash, but the viscount hoped they could foster a relationship. Despite recognizing Peter's lack of worth, he still planned to wed his daughter to him.

***

I feel betrayed.

After arriving at Viscount Razel's spaceport, I took a shuttle with some other noble children down to the planet's surface.

House Razel's planet was composed entirely of self-contained cities that utilized arcology—a blend of architecture and ecology. Each city had everything it needed to function as its own entity. Every aspect, from food production on, was taken care of internally with no need for external trade. The cities were surrounded by looming walls and capped with ceilings of clear glass. Within these walls, the cities even extended underground, and they were crammed with even more people than seemed feasible.

Additionally, the planet was completely ruined, riddled with holes from excessive mining. Its environmental destruction was so complete that the only way the planet could remain livable was through its arcology approach.

It wasn't to my tastes, but it was comfortable enough inside one of these self-contained cities, so that was fine. It wasn't my place to comment on another lord's territory, so no matter how decimated House Razel's planet was, it was no concern of mine.

What I didn't like, and what made me feel like I'd been betrayed, was how I was being treated.

"This is where you'll be living from now on!" one of House Razel's knights—a vassal's vassal, really—declared to all the students in my group.

We were inside a building on the viscount's sprawling estate. The hallway we'd been led to was lined with two-person dorm rooms. Upon hearing this, the noble children muttered things like "This can't be!" in their surprise, but the knight was hardly listening.

"You are not here as guests, but as students. As such, you will follow our policies."

One of the doors was open, and there were two beds and two desks inside. The others in my group seemed to find the accommodations completely incomprehensible. Meanwhile, I was curious as to what kind of fellow I'd be rooming with, but I wasn't too upset; the room I'd been living in at the time of my death in my previous existence was even humbler than this. What *did* trouble me was the viscount's betrayal.

The knight said, louder this time, "Once you've left your belongings in your rooms, gather on the grounds. Quickly now!"

I checked the nameplates by the doors and entered my assigned room, dropping my things off inside. The boy I'd be sharing a room with was a baron's son named Kurt Sera Exner. *Heh, I win.* I was a count, so I was ranked higher than him in the Empire.

As I gloated, the knight started shouting once more since we were all taking our sweet time. "Hurry up! Why are you dawdling?"

"Where do you get off acting so high and mighty?" one of the students shot back. "You're just a vassal knight! I'm the second son of a count, I'll have you know!"

The boy thought to intimidate the knight with their difference in status, but the knight didn't even flinch. "So what? This is Viscount Razel's domain—your name has no power here."

As he said this, the knight knocked the disgruntled trainee to the floor. Seeing this, the rest of the kids all quickened their movements as if suddenly remembering why they were here. I hurriedly changed my clothes and came back out into the hallway to find the knight yelling like some hot-blooded anime character. *Guess I'll call him Hot-Blooded Knight from now on.*

"If you've been lazing around back home, I'm gonna whip you into shape!"

It seemed all my expectations of being entertained and pampered didn't apply to Viscount Razel.

"Damn, this isn't what I imagined."

I was grumbling to myself, but my roommate, Exner, looked unruffled. He had short blond hair with a bit of curl to it and purple eyes. He was tall and well built, so handsome that he stood out even among the nobility, where beauty was the norm. *I'm not gonna like this guy,* I thought to myself. The other children were flustered by the Hot-Blooded Knight, yet Exner alone didn't seem at all bothered. His attitude seemed to say, "That's all it takes for you to lose your cool?" I felt like he was looking down on the rest of us, and it really pissed me off.

The courtyard outside our dorm was set up like an athletic field, filled with various equipment for us to make use of in our training. It made me feel like I was back at school in my former life. When we filed out into the yard, the knight was already there, dressed in a tracksuit, looking exactly like a gym teacher.

"We'll start with running! Get the hang of it quick, 'cause it's gonna be your new morning routine!"

When the kids heard that, they all grimaced like it was the end of the world, I didn't think running was that bad. When I looked at the schedule, I saw that our mandatory wake-up time was later than my usual. However, I was feeling rather defeated for a different reason, and it wasn't because the training was harsher than I'd expected.

"I screwed up. Viscount Razel is the complete opposite of me."

Why did this happen? I was planning on being entertained. Had he forgotten how much money I'd spent to be here? Wouldn't one expect he'd suck up to me a little because of that? Yet it hadn't happened. The reason was pretty clear: Though he'd accepted the vast amounts of money and gifts I'd sent him, Viscount Razel wasn't the sort of covetous or corrupt person to desire such payoffs. Apparently, I had come to the territory of a man of virtue, a truly good person, the type I hated above all else. I could take the other insults, but this was downright infuriating.

"I've come to the wrong place."

I had no way of knowing I'd be training with a family who wouldn't be swayed by bribes. Maybe the Empire wasn't as rotten as I'd thought it was.

While I was ruminating on all this, the Hot-Blooded Knight yelled at me, "What are you doing? Move your feet!"

***

A month had passed since the noble children had been taken in for their training. Viscount Razel had gathered all the teachers to evaluate this year's crop. He found his favorite, Peter, at the bottom of the bunch.

One of the educators was particularly annoyed with the boy. "Will you please give him a warning, Lord Randolph? I've given up on him sleeping during class, but I simply cannot believe that he invites ladies to his room and fools around with them until morning."

Peter was in a special class of children whom the viscount wanted to flatter for their connections. Their training was different from Liam's, and they were being entertained in just the way Liam had been expecting. Their meals were gourmet, and their instructors were all top-notch. If they caused problems, they were given a gentle suggestion to change their behavior rather than a stern reprimand.

"You're right, I'll tell him myself." Viscount Razel hadn't expected much from Peter in the first place, but he assured the teacher he'd talk to the boy and changed the subject. "What about the other students?"

The knight in charge of Liam's class stood up and delivered his report with zeal. "I really let them have it on day one, so they're all well behaved by now. They've gotten used to life here."

No matter how passionate the knight was, the other people in the room showed little interest. Those children's families had been deemed unworthy of bonding with. Still, Viscount Razel at least figured he should ask if there were any standouts.

“Have any of them caught your eye?”
“Yes, definitely Kurt of House Exner. He’s very talented and has a fine disposition. Then there’s Liam of House Banfield. Now *he’s* an interesting kid.”
Liam had been called interesting, yet the viscount’s reaction to the name was frosty. “House Banfield, eh?”
In Viscount Razel’s mind, House Banfield had been the impertinent nobles who’d shown up on the first day with three thousand ships. They’d even brazenly demanded that the viscount resupply and repair their vessels. Their fleet had been of horrid quality, and their knights and soldiers had come across as poorly trained. To him, the family had no redeeming qualities whatsoever.
House Banfield is worthless—unlike Count Petack’s family. House Petack’s fleet was state-of-the-art with well-trained troops. They’re the main family I should be forming ties with.
House Petack had brought a very reasonable three hundred ships with them, and those had left immediately after dropping Peter off, so as not to burden the viscount. He’d received a report stating that their conduct at the spaceport had been flawless, and he was duly impressed.
Every noble had a personal army, but many of these were on the level of pirate fleets. House Petack’s fleet, on the other hand, had been comparable in quality and experience to the Empire’s regular army, and Viscount Razel had been in awe of it. He was grateful that such a family had entrusted their child to him.
“Considering their abilities, I think it would be advisable to give these two boys a higher level of instruction,” the passionate knight suggested.
But Viscount Razel, who valued the family more than the individual, shot down the suggestion without even considering it. “There’s no need. Continue to train them as you have been.”

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It wasn’t long after being entrusted to another house for training that I came to a certain realization.
“This is too easy. I’m bored.”
Each day, I woke up early, exercised, took classes, and performed the work of servants to learn about the function and feelings of those in my employ. I quickly found this lifestyle lax compared to the responsibilities that usually clogged my schedule. I didn’t have to deal with any electronic paperwork in my office, nor did I have to entertain any annoying visitors. Compared to the training I’d undergone to learn the Way of the Flash, the exercise didn’t even serve as a warm-up for me. I basically spent my days with my head cocked to the side, going, “Huh? Is this it?”
Presently, I was cleaning the lawns of the Razel estate, but all the handy tools available made it easy work. I was partnered with a girl with reddish-

brown hair and a lively personality named Eila Sera Berman. Eila could start up a conversation with anyone, she was cheerful, and she was easy to get along with—not exactly my image of a noblewoman. Her figure was average, but her sunny disposition and the cuteness of her smile made her come across as the prettiest girl in our little group.
“Come on, let’s get this done quickly.” Though Eila was being made to perform menial labor, she didn’t grumble about it and still wore a smile on her face. Quite the diligent young lady.
The two of us, working in the coveralls we’d been provided, probably looked like nothing more than servants of the mansion.
A group of fellow students who’d been playing sports nearby passed the two of us as we worked. While the two of us were working, they were just goofing around, though they called it “athletics.” We’d all come to House Razel for training, but there was a clear difference in our treatment.
I spotted Peter from House Petack among them—he was apparently a favorite of Viscount Razel’s. Beside him was the viscount’s daughter, Katerina Sera Razel. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty strode along in her tennis gear. The pair gave off an aura of youthful fulfillment.
Meanwhile, I was feeling increasingly annoyed.
“Why does he like Peter so much?”
Peter couldn’t have surpassed the gifts I had supplied to House Razel—mine were several times the normal amount—and yet *I* was the one being treated as a servant. If Viscount Razel wasn’t swayed by gifts, why did he favor Peter so?
“Are you curious about Peter too, Liam?” Eila asked me.
I continued my work as I answered her. “Yeah, I am. Viscount Razel really seems to like the guy.”
“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that.”
“Do you know anything about it?”
Eila looked up pensively and replied, “From what I hear, Peter’s family is impressive. His territory is growing fast.”
His domain is developing quickly? Well, so was mine.
Eila went on, “See, it used to be incredibly rundown, but through reforms, it was built up to become unrecognizable from its old state. It seems his people revere him as a wise ruler, plus I’ve heard that Peter has full mastery of his sword style. He’s just the heir, so he’s not *officially* a count yet, but I guess people are expecting a lot from him.”
After hearing Eila’s explanation, I understood everything. No wonder Viscount Razel wanted to keep me at a distance. True, I had also developed my territory and gained mastery of the Way of the Flash, and I didn’t intend to let Peter beat me on either of those fronts, but there was obviously a fundamental difference between the two of us.
I was a villain, and Peter was a wise ruler with a brilliant future ahead of him.

Since Viscount Razel looked down on me for all my ostentatious gifts, it was only natural that he'd take a liking to Peter. If he knew all that about Peter's reputation, then he'd obviously researched mine as well.
"It's no wonder he hates me," I muttered.
Looking worried, Eila tried to cheer me up. "Don't get so down about it. Most of the kids here are getting the same treatment we are."
Since Viscount Razel hadn't favored her either, that meant Eila must have been the same as me.
"I'm not down about it. I'm just wondering why you're in the same position I am."
I was growing curious about Eila. She seemed the upstanding sort to me, so I didn't understand why she was getting the same treatment as the rest of us.
"Huh? What do you mean? It makes sense to me." Eila proceeded to tell me about her background. "I'm the third-born daughter, and my brother is the heir back home. He's already finished with his noble training, so they're not expecting much from me. They probably just sent me here thinking they might be able to benefit from establishing a relationship with Viscount Razel."
Her tale was rather sad, but Eila spoke with a smile. Stories like hers weren't uncommon among the children of nobility, so it wasn't as though Eila was especially unfortunate. There were kids like her everywhere.
"Sounds like you've got it rough too," I said, though it was a low-effort comment on my part.
Eila's smile grew a little. "You're a nice guy, Liam, sympathizing with me over something like that."
True, it wasn't really worth the sympathy, given that she still faced a life of nobility. In any case, I was interested in the part about Viscount Razel not liking her. He hadn't given in to my ample bribes, and I imagined all the kids in the same boat as us had been deemed a problem, whether it had to do with them or their families.
In other words, Eila was a comrade of mine.
I'd started to think coming here was a mistake, but maybe it wasn't so bad after all if the kids around me had villainy in their veins.
Eila stepped away and noticed a boy cleaning by himself, as if he'd fled from his partner. It was Exner, wearing the same coveralls we were.
"Oh, it's Kurt. He's your roommate, isn't he?"
We were in fact roommates, but Exner was apparently too proud to let anyone get close to him. He wouldn't even open up to me, so we hadn't had a decent conversation despite having lived together for a month.
"Yep, but His Majesty Kurt doesn't seem to like me."
"Oh, yeah? Well, I think it'd be better if you tried to get along with him."
What makes her say that?
Exner picked up on my staring, turned around, and walked off. His blatant antagonism really did annoy me.

“I just don’t like him.”
I didn’t like the face he always made that seemed to say, “I can do anything.” He really was talented, one of the best kids here from what I could tell.

Eila came closer, her expression dead serious. “That’s not good, Liam.”
“What isn’t?”
“You two were practically dropped into each other’s laps, so you should get along! It’s like fate that you both came to study in the same place, you know?”
I guess you could call it that. A bunch of kids with different backgrounds from all corners of this vast Empire had come together to study in one place. Some might even call it miraculous. Not me, though. I had no desire to push myself to befriend people I disliked. Plus, I was a count, and there was no reason for me to play nice with the son of some lowly baron.
“If he bows his head to me, I’ll consider it.”
“You really are a self-centered guy, aren’t you, Liam? That might kind of work for you, though.”
I thought she was exasperated with me, but when I looked at her, I saw a mischievous glimmer in her eyes.

***

Kurt Sera Exner was utterly disappointed in House Razel, where he’d been sent to study a month ago. He stewed in silence while tending to the estate.
“That should do it.”
House Exner was what Imperial nobles tended to call an “upstart” family. Kurt’s father had been a knight, and he’d earned his peerage by making a name for himself on the battlefield piloting a mobile knight. As a result, he’d become a noble in name, but the domain he’d been awarded was incredibly poor.
Poor or not, House Exner was a barony of the Algrand Empire. As such, there were certain things expected of a family of their rank, and Kurt’s formal training was one of them. However, when he’d arrived, he’d found his days filled with nothing more than playing around. He woke up early, exercised, studied, and worked…but it just wasn’t enough.
“I had more to do at home.”
Kurt’s father was a master of the Ahlen style of swordsmanship, a major style in the Empire. He was known for his talent with a sword and thus had achieved much as a warrior. Kurt had studied the same style and already earned full mastery. Strong and diligent as he was, Kurt felt there was nothing for him to learn from Viscount Razel. In fact, he almost wanted to run away from this place, but he knew he wouldn’t be allowed to do so.
“There was no reason to pay so much for this.”
Kurt was irritated at the fact that he wasn’t getting enough out of the program to justify the money and gifts House Exner had given House Razel. If only he were being taught something really meaningful, that would do him some good in the future. This, however, was just a bunch of children having a ball on another planet. They *were* receiving an education, but it wasn’t nearly strict enough for his liking.

But he detested one aspect of this experience most of all.
“Aha ha ha, we’ll party until morning!”
“Oh, Peter!”
A boy and a girl passed by, clad in gaudy outfits. These children, who were receiving special treatment from House Razel, only made Kurt feel more pathetic. The fact that they had been singled out for their social standing and financial assets made Kurt feel small. It was like House Exner’s worth—or rather lack thereof—was being rubbed in his face. He could hardly bear it.
“What am I even supposed to learn here?”
As he continued with his groundskeeper work, Kurt was thoroughly fed up.

***

I’d finally gotten used to life in House Razel’s domain.
While we were all gathered on the athletic field one day, the Hot-Blooded Knight raised his voice, seeming more agitated than usual.
“Starting today, we’ll be adding martial arts matches to our program! Do not take this training lightly! You don’t want to get hurt.”
The Hot-Blooded Knight was always passionate when it came to things like sports, and all that passion made him pretty insufferable, as far as I was concerned.
“Now, select your preferred weapon! After that, we’ll hold sparring matches in pairs. You can start by facing your roommates.”
Nobles typically studied martial arts as part of their repertoires, so everyone here must’ve had the basics down. Just as I had studied the Way of the Flash, I was sure some of the others had learned similar forms.
All the weapons prepared for us were high-tech. Instead of wooden swords, there were laser blades. I picked up a sword grip with no blade and a beam of light extended out of it. This was a shock sword, pretty much a toy used for training purposes. Normally, it only stung you a little when you were struck by it, but a master swordsman could unleash its hidden power and easily take someone’s life. We’d just be practicing today, though, so a jolt of pain was the worst we could expect.
Other light weapons included spears, bo staffs, and axes. Every student went and picked up their instrument of choice.
“Well, I guess I’m facing you.” I stood with my light katana facing Exner, who stared coldly back at me. He’d picked a broadsword-style shock sword with a double edge. These Western-looking blades were popular in the Empire, so Exner was obviously the more orthodox of the two of us.
He said, “I’m not good at holding back, so I’ll apologize in advance.”
It was clear from his words that he was looking down on me, so I decided to take a stance and impress upon him the hierarchy between us.

“I don’t think you realize the difference in our skills. I have a full mastership in the Way of the Flash, so don’t hold back. Of course, you can always say you were if you want an excuse when you lose.”
Exner cocked his head and looked at me as though I were stupid. “The Way of the Flash? Never heard of it. Is it some obscure style?”
“Oh, *now* you’ve done it. I’m gonna make you eat those words!”
I’m gonna beat the crap out of him, I decided, squeezing the grip of my shock sword. I couldn’t start with the shock sword in a scabbard, but the Way of the Flash didn’t require a proper opening stance.
The Hot-Blooded Knight scanned the group, confirming that everyone was ready.
“Looks like you’re prepared. All right, then…begin!”
At the knight’s signal, we began our matches. While the Hot-Blooded Knight watched over us, I leapt forward to beat Exner down. However, I immediately hit a roadblock—Exner had reacted to my swing and blocked it with his own blade.
“Ngh!”
I intended to knock him out with one quick blow, but he’d met my attack. We both sprang back to put some distance between us.
He matched my movements?
Exner held his light blade straight up and silently watched me. *Getting serious, eh?* I detected no weak points in his stance. I could tell that if I slashed at him, he’d be able to parry it.
He’s strong!
I took my own stance in order to face off against him. I’d thought I’d be able to take him down easily, but instead, I’d just realized a fatal flaw in the Way of the Flash.

***

As he faced off against Liam, Kurt had broken out in a cold sweat and lost all of the composure he’d started out with.
Who is this guy? I figured he was strong, but this is insane.
Facing off against Liam, Kurt was starting to get an idea of the boy’s true abilities. He’d assumed Liam was strong, but standing in front of him, Kurt could feel Liam’s strength permeate his skin. Shocked, he experienced a fear he’d never felt before—all because of this boy.
I mocked his style as obscure, but what was that move? It resembles another style, but he called it the Way of the Flash. Is it some sort of branch style?
House Exner had risen to power on the battlefield, and Kurt’s father had trained him rigorously to make him a warrior as well. Kurt had obtained mastery of his style at a young age because he was stronger than his peers. Therefore, he’d believed no one in his age group at House Razel would be

able to compete with him. How could he not? But he sensed that the boy in front of him, who was his own age, was even stronger than him.
“Looks like I took your style too lightly. I’m sorry.”
Liam spoke just as carefully. He too had lost his earlier composure. “It’s the Way of the Flash. Remember it.”
“I won’t forget it.”
Sweat dripped down Kurt’s cheek and fell from his chin. Still, he smiled. *If I make a bad move, he’ll take me out in one hit.* As his heart thrummed in his chest, he realized he was feeling as nervous as he would if he were facing a superior. He couldn’t even blink in case he missed a subtle movement from Liam.
Where do I strike? How do I do it? I can’t picture my sword reaching him.
He couldn’t imagine any moves that would touch Liam. If he lashed out recklessly, he could easily see Liam landing a counterattack.
The two of them were stuck there, frozen in their stances. Neither one moved, but both were exchanging invisible blows and parries in their minds. Because of their level of skill, they were having a battle that no one else around them could comprehend.
Seeing this, the Hot-Blooded Knight stomped over to them.
“Don’t slack off, you two!”
He rapped the both of them on their heads with his knuckles. All the other kids looked over and laughed at them, except for one, who was watching them mysteriously.

Chapter 3:
Evil Lord Buddies

THE WAY OF THE FLASH had a weakness. No, that wasn't really accurate. It was strong—*too* strong, in fact. Perhaps it was a byproduct of the style's philosophy, but there were no half measures. It was completely specialized in killing your opponent.

It wasn't as though I were completely incapable of holding back. Under the right circumstances, I could, but if my opponent was even a little bit strong, I couldn't do anything short of killing them. If you couldn't best your opponent with simple, basic strikes, all you had to fall back on was your special move—the fatal Flash. I'd only fought pirates up until now, so I'd never even thought about restraining myself. Even shock swords could kill if wielded by masters. And with the Way of the Flash, even toys might be lethal weapons in my hands.

What a "flaw." I'm falling deeper in love with my technique.

"I'll have to hold back while I'm here, though."

I aspired to be an evil lord, not a stupid one. I couldn't exactly act the merciless tyrant in someone else's domain. If I went around lopping heads off in the viscount's territory, he'd obviously have me arrested. Here, there wasn't much meaning in possessing personal strength, but it frustrated me not to be on top. Right now, Exner was my only threat. If he weren't here, I'd be the strongest kid in my class.

If only I could beat Exner, I thought. But then, a curious thing happened.

"Hey, Liam, we're cleaning inside the mansion today—you should hurry and get ready."

Exner, who'd always looked down on me before, was acting strangely familiar with me now, and he'd begun addressing me by my first name. I yearned to demand he show me some respect and call me "my lord," but I was just another student here on this planet. I didn't want to start any trouble, so I was forced to reply as normal.

"I know. Don't rush me."

"It'd be better to be early. The instructors all seem to be on edge lately."

"Did something happen?"

"I guess they need to clean up some stupid party someone had."

"And *we're* the cleaners? Can't they get servants to do that?"

"Well, you know, this is supposed to be part of our training. Don't quite get it, though."

He was smiling more than he used to, and his prickly demeanor had lost a lot of barbs. It was a lot easier to get along with my roommate than fight with him, but I wasn't sure how to deal with his sudden friendliness either. After all, I considered him an enemy I would have to take down eventually, someone I had to remind of my superiority.

I guess this is fine for now…
There was one more problem, though. Another oddity had been born from this, and it bothered me more than Exner's new attitude.
The female students and mansion servants had started looking at me and Exner differently. It wasn't hostility I caught in their eyes. Was it curiosity, or something more? Their constant gazes and furtive glances bothered me, and I felt like they burned with intensity whenever Exner and I were together.

***

While Liam and Kurt were cleaning the mansion, the class of Razel's darlings had gathered in an indoor facility with their instructors, going through practice matches with shock swords.
It was a large dojo that could accommodate many people, but unlike when Liam's class had practiced outside, here matches were held one at a time, the mood hence more laid back.
Katerina, Viscount Razel's daughter, sat on a bench in her athletic outfit. Peter sat next to her, shock sword in hand. He refused to participate in the sparring matches, simply observing them instead.
"You should join a match too, Peter. You have full mastery and you're really strong, right?"
House Razel had decided that Katerina should marry Peter, so she'd been told to accompany him as much as possible. For his part, Peter must have been fond of the pretty girl since he tended to brag about spending time with her.
Katerina was curious about him. He's supposed to be the heir of a rapidly rising house, but I wonder if that's true. I'm kind of suspicious of his claim that he's a master swordsman.
Peter gave an excuse, sounding annoyed. "I'm just too strong, Katerina. I mean, in my domain, I've never lost a bout. If I got serious here, it'd be like an adult having a serious match against a child."
Katerina grew even more suspicious after hearing his excuse. "Come on, fight and show me, then."
"Men who are truly strong only fight when the situation calls for it."
Katerina was now fed up with Peter's vague excuses to avoid the matches. She looked out a window and saw some male students walking by, carrying cleaning equipment.
Peter looked down his nose at them, making no effort to mask his disdain. "What a sorry sight. Poor nobles who have to work so hard shouldn't even come here for training."
Katerina thought those boys must still be more skilled than Peter, who refused to fight in a single match…not that she herself was fond of the lesser nobles who stuck out like an eyesore at their estate.

“That’s true. I know they work so hard to come here so they can at least say they studied at House Razel, but I wish they’d choose a place that suited their meager status.”
“Right?”
Since children came here in abundance to study every year, Katerina didn’t see much point in focusing on those from houses they didn’t care to associate with. The boys she spied outside the dojo weren’t even on her radar.

***

Once we completed our cleaning duties inside the mansion, we headed outside. Other kids in coveralls hauled around equipment, grumbling as they walked.
Nearby was a dojo where the kids getting special treatment were doing their own sparring matches. These were the children the honest, upright Viscount Razel favored, so they were likely from families who were just as righteous and moral as him. It made me sick.
I’d piled a ton of money and resources into their treasury, and Brian had even handed over his prize-winning bonsai, yet this was how they were treating me? Viscount Razel was probably such a stickler for morality that he despised receiving bribes.
Man, I messed up. I shouldn’t have come to a house like this. While I was musing, Eila ran up to me.
“Hi, Liam. How’s it going with Kurt?”
“How’s what going?”
“Well, hasn’t he gotten a little friendlier? That must have been because of you, right? It looks like you’re the only one he’s opened up to.”
If he did feel any connection to me, I figured it was because we were both skilled with the sword.
“Oh, Exner…”
“Why the last name? You’re closer than that now, aren’t you?”
“What? It’s not like we’re friends.”
To me, he was nothing more than an enemy I had yet to defeat. Frowning, Eila brought her face right up to mine. I arched my back to pull away from her, but she continued pressing in.
“That’s not good, you know—you’re roommates! You should chat and get to know each other.”
“I can’t imagine that stick-in-the-mud has anything interesting to say.”
Despite my words, Eila started shoving me after Exner, who’d walked on ahead of me. “Just talk to him!”
She’s being too pushy! It doesn’t seem like she has any special feelings for me, so I don’t get it. Is she just a busybody?

***

That night, while Exner sat at his desk diligently studying and I lay in my bed, I recalled my conversation with Eila. I decided I would try to talk to him; idle small talk would probably be best. I could touch on simple topics like, “Why did you come to House Razel?” and “What’s your family like?” Now that I thought about it, I’d barely ever talked with anyone my own age in this world. After all, there hadn’t been anyone my own age around me. After talking to him, I realized something.

“Wow, a 60 percent tax? You guys must be demons. Not even I would do that.” I clutched my stomach as I laughed.

I’d thought Exner was as straitlaced as they came, but it turned out, he was from a family of evil lords just like me. This guy was the heir to my ideal family.

“It’s not a laughing matter.”

“Sorry…don’t get mad. I *am* impressed, though.”

House Exner ruled over one planet and one planet alone, and they didn’t even have enough power to properly develop it.

“House Exner is self-made. We have territory now, but we don’t know what to do with it. None of us really know how to govern, and we don’t have any vassals either.”

They’d obtained their domain by making a name for themselves as knights. Though Exner’s father had been made a baron, neither he nor his family had any experience in ruling, and consequently the family had mismanaged their finances. It should have been easy enough to govern their people adequately, so the fact that they hadn’t must mean they were real scoundrels.

Exner sighed with dismay. “I don’t know how much tax to charge or how to treat my people. I came here specifically to learn those things, but I could get *this* level of training anywhere. Next year, we’ll need to do mining work for them on one of their resource asteroids. Maybe that will help me understand the feelings of my subjects, but it’s frustrating not being able to learn how to conduct myself as a ruler.”

He’d come here to learn how Viscount Razel ruled his people, but he was only gaining a useless taste of normal citizen life. It wasn’t the right fit for him. Now I knew why Viscount Razel didn’t want a relationship with Baron Exner—he just hated evil lords. But me? I was taking a liking to Exner.

“You came to study at the wrong place.” I smirked, and Exner—Kurt—looked grim.

“I’m aware of that, but I have to learn as much as I can for my parents.”

I sat up in my bed, deciding to give the serious guy some advice. “Don’t get angry now, Kurt. I can teach you some things.”

“Huh?”

“You wanted to know about taxes and how to treat your people, right?”

Citizenry differed greatly between the Empire’s planets, and sometimes even on the same planet. For that reason, it was hard to come up with

broadly applicable policies. House Exner didn't have any vassals, so policies focused on specific regions would be impossible to oversee. But if their policies were too uniform, it would provoke the people.
If they chose to revolt, the Empire would have to get involved, and it'd be a whole mess. Were I the one in charge, I'd send my personal army to suppress the rebellion. I was kind to my subjects when they obeyed me, but I would never allow any such disobedience. If a ruler wasn't strong, his people would just take advantage of him. No world ran on sticks alone, though—you needed carrots too.
"Seems like you're bleeding them pretty dry right now, and that's a bad move. You've gotta let up a bit. At 60 percent taxation, they don't have a chance of improving their lives."
"M-my father understands that too, but…" Kurt looked away.
Since Baron Exner understood this but was still doing it, he must be a real scumbag. It sounded like the baron was a second-rate evil lord, but as a fellow villain, I did kind of want to get to know him. After all, bad guys ganged up, didn't they? I figured I should pursue relationships like that.
"Listen, this is important. You get more profit wringing money out of rich people than you do poor people, right?"
"What are you trying to say, Liam?"
"You've got to make them wealthy before you squeeze taxes out of them. That'll improve your revenue."
"It's not that easy."
You're second-rate because you're too focused on reaping the rewards right away! No, you guys are third-rate. I wanted House Exner to work a little harder as evil lords.
"Stop making excuses! Just do it! You can bleed them dry *after* that. At that point, the money will roll in without you lifting a finger. You just have to be patient until then. Once your people are wealthy, then you can tax the heck out of them. Oh, and make sure you keep up a proper military—don't skimp on that."
Some nobles didn't let their domains advance too much out of fear of a rebellion. In fact, many rulers only educated the people they needed and let the rest live in a society right out of the Middle Ages. My own parents had been like that. It was also more complex and hence more difficult to govern a society if you let it develop, and many rulers didn't want to bother with that. Still, I firmly believed that my approach of making my subjects prosperous before exploiting them was best.
Apparently impressed by my enthusiasm, Kurt stopped making excuses.
"You've been lord of your domain for a while now, isn't that right, Liam? Seems you've got it all figured out."
"Bleeding my people is my specialty."
As a fellow evil lord, and as his senior, I've got to show Kurt the way. If he needs it, I'll give him my support as well. In return, he'd better help me out if I'm ever in trouble.

***

Liam's words rattled Kurt to the core. Yes, he'd known full well what needed to be done, but he'd been putting it off for one reason or another. Liam's strong assertion to act had made an impact on him.

True…if our people are just barely getting by now, improving their lives is of utmost importance. We should prioritize that at any expense.

Kurt's father, Baron Exner, had inherited a pretty shoddy domain that was previously governed by a magistrate. And yet, despite the poor state of his territory, the baron was still expected to make his contribution to the Empire. He had no financial credit and no relationships with nobles who could help him, so he had put a large burden on his people, and even his own family lived frugally.

I just gave up, thinking there was nothing that could be done to turn our situation around. I've been lying to myself.

Kurt knew they needed to decrease taxes, but it wasn't that simple. He regretted the strained existence forced upon his people, but he'd continued under the notion that the problem was insurmountable. He was ashamed of his inaction now.

He was supposed to be here learning how to govern his domain, and he'd been hoping to establish a relationship with Viscount Razel himself. Yet he wasn't getting the training he'd been hoping for, and he hadn't been able to form any relationships whatsoever…except with this boy who shared his room.

Kurt pushed onward, feeling faintly hopeful. "Military expansion costs money too. Just the cost of maintenance alone is a problem. We can't afford to spend any more, so what do we do?"

Why am I coming to a boy my own age for advice?

He felt ridiculous asking about it so seriously, but Liam was replying in earnest. There was nothing mocking in his expression, and he didn't seem to be speaking as a boy of Kurt's age, but as a lord.

"Don't expand; *reduce* your numbers. What's important is the quality of your equipment and your troops' training. Instead of a hundred outdated vessels, get your hands on a few new models."

"Sure, I'd like that, but we don't have the funds to do anything. The people can't handle more of a burden."

For some reason, Liam seemed happy to hear that. "You're really exploiting the crap out of 'em, huh?"

Kurt felt ashamed that House Exner had no choice but to do so. "We can't do anything else."

"So borrow money. Just make sure you pay it back. I've had real trouble with that myself, let me tell you, but it was my parents' debt." Liam knit his brow as Kurt lamented his ability to do just that.

“Again, House Exner has no credit. Maybe we can get a small loan somewhere, but no one is willing to lend us a significant amount of money, and military purchases always cost a vast sum. It’s impossible.”
He kept circling back to the same issue. House Exner had no credit and no nobles were willing to support them, so they had no way of borrowing money. Kurt couldn’t see a solution to the problem, but then Liam said something strange.
“I’ll have a chat with my Echigoya.”
“Echigoya? Who’s that?”
“House Banfield’s personal merchant. If you want, you guys can use me as a reference.”
Kurt’s eyes went wide when he heard this. Liam was essentially promising to serve as guarantor on their loan.
“Is that okay? If House Exner can’t pay it back, you’ll be in trouble.”
“I’m not so destitute that it’d be an issue. Hey, I like your guts for exploiting your people. As fellow villains, we should get along.”
“Villains?” Kurt echoed, looking puzzled.
That’s an odd way to put it. Of all the leaders I know, I’d say Liam’s on the diligent side.
Liam’s eyes narrowed, his face grave. “Most lords are villains, though Viscount Razel seems to be an exception. As far as I’m concerned, guys who do nothing but spout platitudes make me sick. So which one are you?”
Kurt was overwhelmed by Liam’s intensity. So he still calls himself a villain, even though he governs benevolently? He must mean his resolve as a leader.
Determining that Liam was what a lord should be, Kurt made up his mind.
“I want to be like you, Liam.”
Liam grinned, showing off his pearly whites. “Let’s be friends, Kurt! We’ll join forces as villains and make it through this life together. Okay…now that we’re done talking about money, we’ll move on to politics. First, tell me all about your territory. Together, we can think of ways to bleed your people dry.”
“Got it.”
He’s so foul-mouthed, though. He looks out so much for his people, yet he talks about bleeding them dry and being a villain…
Kurt thought Liam’s way of putting things was strange, but he decided to accept these quirks. From Kurt’s perspective, Liam was the very picture of a wise and compassionate leader. Moreover, he was willing to lend a hand to a struggling self-made noble house like the Exners.
“Do you mind if I contact my father first? This is a little too much for me to handle on my own.”
“Okay, I’ll contact the Henfrey Company too, then.”
Kurt and Liam had grown closer through this discussion, though they were not exactly on the same page.

***

Thomas, the head of the Henfrey Company, looked troubled after taking Liam's call.
"Hmm, what to do about this…?" he muttered.
"What is it?" one of his nearby employees asked.
"We've received a request to lend money to Baron Exner," Thomas explained.
"A struggling noble? You're not going to accept, are you?"
Normally, Thomas would never have accepted such a request, but this time he intended to make an exception.
"House Banfield is going to be the guarantor on the loan, so I must accept, you see."
His employee cocked his head. "If House Banfield is backing them, we shouldn't have any problems with repayment, right?"
Thomas wished he could turn the baron down, but he couldn't…not when the Henfrey Company was House Banfield's personal merchant. He was making quite the profit in Liam's domain, so how could he deny the boy?
The problem, however, was not House Banfield *or* House Exner.
"I don't mind loaning money to the Exners, honestly. If Lord Liam wants me to do it, then I'll do it, of course. But word tends to spread about things like this. There'll be lords swarming us for loans that they have no intention of paying back. They'll say, 'You'll lend money to those upstarts, but not to us?' and so on."
His subordinate grimaced. "There *are* people like that, aren't there?" He could just picture nobles using that exact script to bully loans from them. The poor nobles would come running if they lent out money to one of them.
Despite the fact that the Henfrey Company had Liam's backing, many nobles still looked down on them. Having the support of House Banfield was reassuring, but it clearly had its downsides as well.
"Well, the bottom line is that we can't turn down a favor if Lord Liam is the one asking. We'll contact Baron Exner right away."

***

Thus, I introduced my wily cohort, Thomas Henfrey, to Kurt's family.
Expanding my network of evil friends had me on cloud nine, and I couldn't help but grin.
"Friends are a wonderful thing. They can help you out when you're in trouble."
Sent outside on yard-cleaning duty, I worked beside Eila. Since the other students had been assigned different jobs, it was just the two of us.
Eila was smiling too. "I'm glad you and Kurt are getting along now," she said. She really was a busybody, but I'd managed to make an evil lord friend because of her, so I let it slide.

“I have to thank you. It seems I was mistaken about Kurt.”
I’d thought he was a diligent, virtuous young man, but the truth was that he was only a diligent evil lord (or at least, one in the making) who hoped to bleed his subjects dry when he could.
Eila waved away my thanks, looking rather embarrassed. “That’s okay. I’m just happy you two are getting along now.”
“Mind telling me about your situation?”
I was sure her family was up to some nasty stuff too, and I hoped it might lead to another beneficial relationship.
“I already told you about me.”
“Give me more details.”
For a moment, Eila looked a little uncomfortable, but then she started to explain her situation while she worked.
“I don’t know that much about my family since I haven’t really been involved in their business. I’m pretty much just expecting to get married to a boy of a similar station. That’s it.”
Eila was the daughter of a baron, so her social standing was the same as Kurt’s.
“Well, maybe you could marry Kurt. He doesn’t have a fiancée, you know.”
“I’d feel bad for Kurt. Plus, I don’t really have a say in it; my family’s supposed to arrange that stuff.”
“You don’t?”
“That’s how it normally goes.”
House Razel also tended to arrange their daughter’s marriages. Ladies born into noble houses were often forced to accept this, but it still seemed awfully strange that, in a high-tech world of space warships and human-shaped weapons, you couldn’t choose your partner.
“Sorry for asking stupid questions.”
“You’re just worried about me, right? It’s okay, it doesn’t bother me.” Eila smiled brightly to reassure me.
While we were talking, we heard voices coming from behind a nearby building.
“What’s going on?”
I peered around the corner and spotted Katerina. She was hiding behind the building, locked in an embrace with a man. I heard her speak again in a hushed tone.
“We can’t do this… What if someone finds us?”
“It’ll be fine. I’ll shut them up.”
I was angry at them for flaunting their promiscuity in a place like this, but my surprise was even stronger. Eila hid beside me and watched them. The look on her face said that she’d seen something she shouldn’t have. We pulled back from the building’s corner.
“That’s not Peter she’s with, and I heard they’ll be engaged soon. Isn’t this a little risky?”

Eila was sugarcoating things, in my opinion. The way I saw it, Katerina was clearly cheating. My heart went cold as ice as I remembered the way my wife had cheated on me in my past life.
“I didn’t expect this from Viscount Razel’s daughter,” I said bitterly. I was starting to feel bad for Peter.
Eila was a little taken aback by my frigidity. “I guess it is pretty questionable. And not well executed either, considering we saw them.” She giggled behind her hand, clearly not taking this too seriously.
“Are all girls like this?” I asked her. “I know it’s a political marriage, and there’s probably no love in it, but don’t you think this is going too far?”
Eila shook her head. “No, this isn’t normal behavior. Sneaking around like that is extremely risky. If you wanted to take a lover, like a mistress, you’d talk about it with your spouse first and make sure it’s okay, and maybe not until after you had an heir.”
Many couples in the Empire acted like business partners, simply working together to produce an heir. My parents had been like that. They were married, but they each had their own separate families as well. Such a thing wasn’t rare in this world.
“So there are no marriages for love, then,” I asserted, but Eila denied it.
“That’s not true. There are nobles who marry for love or without considering the political benefits of the partnership. Love is powerful, after all. It can overcome all obstacles!”
“Y-you think so?” I was a little surprised by her passionate declaration. I took another peek at Katerina, my heart going out to Peter.
I’d heard that the Petacks were very skilled, benevolent leaders, so I pitied the boy for having to marry someone like Katerina. It wasn’t as if I’d ever spoken to Peter, though, and I didn’t want to make trouble for the viscount I was staying with, so I decided to keep quiet about it.
Plus, I didn’t like guys like Peter anyway. I didn’t like him personally, and I didn’t like his benevolently ruling family. He and his kind were the mortal enemies of an evil lord like me.
Katerina and her partner indulged in a passionate kiss. Seeing this, Eila blushed and tugged at my clothes. “Come on, we should do our work somewhere else, Liam.”
“Guess so. But, jeez, Peter doesn’t even know anything about this. What a clown.”

***

Finished with my landscaping work, I headed to the dining hall for dinner and ran into Kurt.
He waved his hand when he saw me. “Over here, Liam!”
“Yeah, yeah. Don’t make a scene.”

He really stood out, waving his hand and smiling like that. He was just too handsome. All the girls—and some of the boys—who'd come to train at House Razel were watching him. Some of the girls were even blushing.
I picked up my food at the serving counter and carried my tray to the table where Kurt was seated. Our trays had the exact same contents—the food looked like Western dishes from my past life, but it was all fake. The meat was just synthesized protein and other essential nutrients, but it didn't taste bad. In fact, it tasted exactly like it looked. Still, the food was hardly fit for nobles, emblematic of the poor treatment we were receiving. It served its purpose in nourishing us, though, so there was no harm except to my pride.
I started eating, and Kurt launched into conversation.
"We've been here for a year now. Next year, we'll go out to an asteroid and do some mining."
"All they did this year was work us like servants."
We'd been treated better than House Razel's actual servants, of course, but we'd paid good money to come here, so I was hardly content. We were getting the bare minimum of an education and combat training, but there was so much missing that it felt like a complete waste.
Kurt seemed interested in the mining work, though. "At least that involves pilot training."
His father, Baron Exner, had made a name for himself as a mobile knight pilot, so Kurt was naturally fascinated with mobile knights.
"Can you even call it training if we're just operating mining machinery?"
"It'll be better than being here." Kurt didn't seem willing to complain openly about House Razel's treatment, but he was eager to do work in space instead. "Plus, you'll be there, so I can ask you for advice if I need it. I'm really grateful."
Nowadays, Kurt was always asking me about governing matters, and passionately so. He took my lessons seriously and absorbed the knowledge quickly, so I got to feel like a proud elder evil lord.
"Ask me anything. I'll do all I can to assist you."
"Thank you so much. I think it was a miracle that I met you, Liam!"
Thank me more! I gloated internally until I heard something strange from behind me.
"KurLia? It's KurLia, right?"
"Are you stupid? It's 100 percent LiaKur."
"What? Why are you like this? Are you an idiot?"
What were these strange, incantation-like words "KurLia" and "LiaKur" I overheard behind me? Kurt cocked his head as well, clearly not understanding either.
While we were puzzling over this, Eila walked over to us. "How are you two doing?" she asked, overflowing with energy. Kurt greeted her in kind.
Eila was cheerful around everyone, so she was friends with all of us. I realized that, at some point, I'd stopped hearing those odd incantations.

Kurt said, “You seem even cheerier than usual, Eila. Did something nice happen?”
“Mm, well, a couple of things. But more importantly, we’ve got mining work in space coming up, right? Do you want to be in the same group?”
Apparently, she was here to see if we could cluster up.
“It’s fine with me. What about you, Liam?” Kurt turned to me.
“I don’t care.” Eila smiled brighter at my reply. I had no idea what she was so happy about, but she seemed like she was in a great mood.
“It’s decided, then. I hope we’ll be good buddies even in outer space!”
Eila skipped away to pick up her food at the counter.

***

As Liam and Kurt ate in the dining hall, someone watched them with a surreptitious gaze, unnoticed.
“Heh heh heh.”
As she continued to spy on the two boys, some other girls approached her.
“What should we do now?” one of the girls whispered to the voyeur.
“Nothing yet,” she replied.
“Well, when *will* things move forward, then?” The other girls looked disappointed, but the watcher didn’t take her eyes off the two boys.
“I’ll proceed with the plan once we’re up in space.”
The passionate fire in her eyes was anything but normal.

***

We headed into space as scheduled and boarded a ship like a big rectangular box. Wearing hand-me-down space suits, we stood in the hangar before humanoid machinery used for mining. These machines varied in size, and the one I would be piloting was about eight meters tall. It was a simple design consisting of a round torso with four limbs attached.
“This suit stinks of sweat.” My bulky suit was cheaply made and had only the bare minimum of functions, unlike the space suit I usually wore.
Kurt smiled wryly. “This is a good opportunity to learn how miners feel.”
“You always look on the bright side, don’t you?”
“I think we should take whatever opportunities we can to see how our subjects live.”
Wow, I’m so grateful for this chance, I might just weep! Not. This is totally pointless.
“Yeah, well, it doesn’t mean anything if you don’t act on it.”
Knowing how my subjects felt wasn’t going to change my plans of being an evil lord; I absolutely still planned to follow through on that. But if a guy like me was so miserable in this outfit, it must have been even harder on a lady.
Our suits were scratched up and fading, and the mining machinery was no different. The humanoid machines were all beaten up, and each scuff was

like a tally from a former pilot. We were managing, but Eila already seemed fed up.
“I don’t want to wear a space suit that smells like someone else! Couldn’t they at least let us use our own?” she complained. I felt the same way.
The Hot-Blooded Knight floated upside-down in the weightless space in front of us. Meanwhile, the humanoid machinery stood on the walls and ceiling. In this environment, where we didn’t know up from down, the Hot-Blooded Knight gave one of his typical, overly passionate speeches.
“Don’t complain! This is an opportunity for you to understand how your subjects really feel! At the same time, you must study these matters from a noble’s perspective!”
We listened in silence now as the Hot-Blooded Knight zealously went out.
“Your profit is made off the backs of the workers who endure these substandard conditions. It’s easy enough to spend money on superior facilities, but you must not forget that knowledge and hard work can solve problems just as readily! You’ll need to find a solution in situations where your funds don’t mean anything! You must value the contributions of the individual. In their shoes, see if you can improve your situation yourself. That’s what makes this training important.”
Kurt appeared to take his words quite seriously. “True, it’ll be a worthwhile experience if we can improve the situation here without spending money.”
Eila didn’t seem interested, or maybe she’d just given up already. “Well, I can’t think of anything that might improve mining operations. If I couldn’t make a profit anyway, I’d just as soon back off. What do you think, Liam?”
Eila and Kurt both looked at me, so I decided to tell them what was what, even if it annoyed me to do so. The Hot-Blooded Knight was mostly right—one should always try to solve problems with knowledge and effort instead of simply throwing money at it. That much was painfully obvious. But there was more to it than that, and his gung-ho, pro-teamwork attitude made me sick.
“Are you two stupid? You think the shortcomings here are the laborers’ fault for not using their brains or not working hard enough? They’re not. It’s House Razel’s fault for creating a situation the laborers would want to improve. Relying solely on the people at the bottom is just a negligent attitude on the part of their superiors. If they wanted to fix things, they could ask the workers for feedback and make improvements based on that. But they don’t, and that means they have no intention of fixing anything here.”
It was the responsibility of the people at the top to make sure a profit was being made. In my case, I had the alchemy box to rely on, so it was pointless comparing House Razel’s systems of government and administration with my own. For me, this exercise was a complete waste of time.
“Umm, Liam…” Eila said, a strained smile on her face. “Our teacher’s giving you a nasty look.”
Kurt looked equally uncomfortable. “Maybe you shouldn’t be so blunt.”

The Hot-Blooded Knight had been glaring at me for a while now, so I stared right back. Don't give me a look like that unless you're prepared for the consequences. I'll kill you!

"I don't intend on changing my philosophy. If the people on top demand change from the people on the bottom, then they're in the wrong. The people who should really be applying their bodies and brains are Viscount Razel and his vassals."

I'd gotten so heated because I remembered my past life from before I'd been fired. All sorts of extra work had been forced upon me, including finding ways to improve efficiency. My boss had constantly told me to use my head and work harder, but any suggestion of mine that might cost money would be shut down immediately, even if I explained that it would increase profits in the long run. If anything I suggested was implemented and worked out, my superior would take credit for it, and I'd get nothing. Yet, for some reason, I continued to believe that if I worked diligently, I'd finally be recognized for it. How foolish of me. Needless to say, that never came to pass.

If you worked diligently like an idiot, you'd just be exploited in return. In my eyes, you should only do the work you were paid for and no more. If your superiors required more than that, they should invest money in the solution, and if that weren't possible, then they shouldn't expect workers not to cut corners where they could. I wanted to go back in time and tell my past self that if I wasn't seeing recognition for my extra efforts, I should just stop making them.

Still, having realized I was taking out my past-life frustrations on House Razel, I decided I'd be better off keeping my head down for the rest of my training. I thought the Hot-Blooded Knight would give me a stern reprimand, but he just moved on to the operation of the mining machines.

"Everyone, board!"

I clambered into the cockpit of one of the human-shaped machines and found it incredibly tight. There was almost no room to stretch my body, and when I gripped the control sticks, the craft kind of wobbled. Perhaps it was the fault of shoddy maintenance. The view outside the machine was projected on the inside of my helmet. I saw the Hot-Blooded Knight board a humanoid machine of his own, and the hangar door of the box-shaped ship opened up.

"When you're all ready, you'll exit the ship in order. Once we're all outside, follow my instructions!"

***

A string of humanoid machines leapt out of the box-shaped spaceship. Like the rest, my unit landed on the surface of the resource asteroid.

"This is just a toy compared to the Avid."

Most of my fellow students in their unreliable units had fumbled the landing and fallen to the ground. For those noble children who had piloted mobile knights before, these units with only the bare minimum of functionality were no doubt especially frustrating to control.

The only ones who hadn't fallen were Kurt and Eila. Like me, Kurt had landed with ease, and Eila had made it to the ground on her feet, though slowly and hesitantly. It seemed to me that Kurt had a good feel for the controls, but he mostly owed his landing to intense concentration. As for the rest, they were just pathetic.

The Hot-Blooded Knight landed next to me and said over our comm link, "Well, seems you're skilled enough to back your smack talk. If you're ever in need of work, come to me. I'll hire you as a laborer."

I couldn't laugh at his joke, but I didn't want to antagonize him and have to deal with the consequences later, so I decided to play nice this time.

"If you want to hire me, it'll cost you."

"Hey, if you can keep proving that you're not all talk. All right, everybody line up!"

The students in their humanoid machinery all lined up, though it was a struggle for some. And so our trial mining work in space began.

Chapter 4:
Suspicious Person

IN ORDER TO PERFORM our mining work, we shacked up on a space colony. In other words, we'd been chased out of Viscount Razel's mansion.

The space colony was on a fully mined asteroid that had been repurposed for habitation. It consisted of a dormitory complex built into a series of hollowed-out mines. Only the bare necessities were provided; I didn't care to stay here for long. Citizens from House Razel's domain who worked out here at these asteroids called it home, at least for stretches.

The building we bunked in had a little more effort put into it, but was still of low quality. It was located in a section of the colony where relatively wealthy people would stay. Still, its facilities were lacking.

Sweating from my daily exercise, I opened the top half of my coveralls and peeled them down to my waist. "Dammit, I screwed up again!" I wiped myself with a towel and tossed it aside.

Kurt was sweating too and had also pulled down his coveralls. "You go at it hard first thing in the morning, huh? We've still got mining practice after this, you know."

"That's not practice; it's just busywork."

Six months had passed since we'd come to the asteroid, and all we did was mine the whole time. We'd be here for at least a year. We were supposed to be experiencing the life of a commoner, but it felt like we were just being exploited for our labor. Anyway, I had no interest in learning how poor citizens lived.

First thing every morning, the two of us got up and worked out, then headed for the showers. Today, we ran into Eila on our way there. She was a ray of sunshine even this early in the morning, out of breath from running to meet us.

"Morning, you two!" She stepped between us and yanked us in close.

"Get away from me," I snapped. "I'm all sweaty."

"Aww, I don't care. I'm about to go shower too. I'd rather take a bath, but they only have those at night here."

Eila always grumbled about the "harsh environment" we were in, but when I considered my past life, I couldn't find it all that harsh.

She manipulated a tablet, and a tiny drone flew out of it. The spherical drone was about the size of a marble, and it floated in the air without the use of propellers.

"Let me take some videos, you guys. I'll edit them and send them to you later."

A few more drones appeared and floated around us. Apparently, she intended to make some 3D images and videos for posterity.

“Um, sure, but we’re not exactly decent right now.” Kurt was embarrassed about being half nude, but Eila didn’t seem bothered in the slightest. Was it just because she was so easygoing?
“It’s fiiine. We’ve gotta keep records of all the fun we’re having!” Eila struck a pose in front of the drones, then turned back to Kurt and me. “Come on, you two, put your arms around each other’s shoulders. I wanna get a shot of your beautiful friendship.”
Practically forced into it, Kurt and I reluctantly put our arms around each other’s shoulders (though Kurt seemed to be having fun for some reason) and let her take some pictures and videos of us.
Eila gave us a thumbs-up, seeming satisfied. “Thanks, boys!”
Well, this training at House Razel is pointless, but I guess I’m glad I met these two, at least. Kurt’s an evil lord just like me, and Eila’s definitely a different type of woman from my wife in my past life. I’m thankful that she’s chummy and not interested in dating me.
While I was considering my new friends, I suddenly remembered my other companions. “Oh, come to think of it, I’ve forgotten to contact Brian.”
I realized that I’d been so busy with my training that I’d neglected to stay in touch with my butler.

***

I headed to the communications room. Here, I’d use the specialized equipment to contact my far-off domain. Their price tag was nothing to sneeze at, so there were fewer devices available than people who wanted to use them. For that reason, there was always a line, and your time on them was limited.
When it was my turn and my call was answered, I saw both Amagi and Brian on the large monitor in front of me. Even with her limited expressions, Amagi appeared angry.
“I believe we requested regular contact, Master.”
“Don’t be mad. I’ve got a lot going on.”
“I am not angry. As long as you are well, there is no problem.”
After Amagi had confirmed my good health, she switched places with Brian. He looked relieved to find me healthy after not calling for some time.
“Master Liam, how is life with House Razel?”
“I don’t have much to do besides work. The actual training isn’t very rewarding either, so I do my own workout every morning.”
“It’s good that you have so much energy. What are those clothes you’re wearing? Work clothes? Is that your training uniform?”
He seemed to find the humble work coveralls I wore strange.
“This? It’s what we usually wear here.”
Brian seemed stunned. *“Huh?”*
“Anyway, give me your report. How’s our immigration plan going? And the army expansion?”

Amagi took over for Brian, who had frozen solid, and gave me a concise report.
“Both plans are proceeding according to schedule. Master, what do you mean when you say that is your uniform? I am also curious as to why you are not contacting us from House Razel’s mansion, but from one of their resource asteroids.”
Normally, these calls had always basically just been them asking, “How are you?” and me replying, “Fine.” They never asked questions about what I was learning here, exactly. Or rather, we hadn’t had time to indulge in long conversations because of all the people waiting to use the communication devices and the limited time of our calls.
“Yeah, we’re up on an asteroid colony. It’s actually kind of hilarious how crappy it is here. There was really nothing to learn at Viscount Razel’s house, but at least there are some interesting people here, so I’m not too bored.”
“And what are you doing on this resource asteroid?”
“Mining work. We’re gonna be here for a whole year too.”
At that point in my conversation with Amagi, Brian butted back in.
“W-w-wait just a moment! What do you mean, ‘mining work’?! They’re making you work, Master Liam? Not just as a practical lesson, but for an entire year?”
“That’s right. We’re mining with humanoid machinery. We got hauled up to this space colony to learn the ‘beauty of labor’ or whatever. Makes you sick, doesn’t it?”
I laughed, but Brian was pale and quivering. I figured he’d be angry. We’d poured tons of funds into my noble training and sent plenty of gifts too. Naturally, he wouldn’t be able to accept how I was being treated in spite of all that.
The door to the communications room opened and Kurt poked his head in.
“Your time’s almost up, Liam.”
“That was fast. Well, don’t worry about me, Amagi. You too, Brian. Anyway, I’m dominating the mining work. The foreman wants to recruit me, even.”
“No! Master Liam, this isn’t right! Please, give us a few more details—”
“Sorry, I gotta go. Talk to you later, Amagi.”
“I hope you will provide more details next time.”
Brian started to add something, but I ignored him, said goodbye again to Amagi, and disconnected.

***

“Oh, Master Liaaam! This is not right, not right at all! A count should *not* be subjected to mining work on a resource asteroid! If it’s not just a practical lesson, and you’re actually working for an entire year, you’re being deceived!” Brian continued to shout even after communications had been cut off.

“He cannot hear you anymore,” Amagi told him.
Brian fell to his knees before the communicator. “They can’t treat him like this after all the funds and gifts we sent them! We must protest! We’ll contact the viscount and make him improve Master Liam’s treatment.”
“Unfortunately, we are lacking additional information. However, I agree that I never imagined Master receiving such a poor reception.”
Amagi also wanted to know more about the situation. House Banfield’s reputation had long been at rock-bottom. A somewhat chilly welcome might have been expected, but that was exactly why they’d sent so much money. Hearing that Liam was being treated so harshly regardless confused her.
Brian was not only confused, but furious. “Right, we’ll investigate the matter and then protest! We must use any means necessary. If only I’d known about Master Liam’s situation sooner.” Tears poured from his eyes. “Using our precious Master Liam as nothing more than a laborer… How could they?!”
“I agree completely. First, we must gather information on House Razel. I must confess I am also relieved, however.”
“Which part of this relieved you?”
“I was pleased to find that Master had made some friends.”
When this sank in, Brian gasped. “That’s right! Master Liam has never had children his own age around him, so he never had a chance to make friends. I’d hoped this would be an opportunity for him, and it’s happened! He’s finally made friends!”
Brian took out his handkerchief and wiped away his tears. He was thankful that Liam had bonded with his peers. These would not be subjects or subordinates, but nobles just like him.
But that achievement could wait; they had important matters to take care of.
“Nevertheless, we cannot let House Razel get away with this.”
Amagi nodded. “I will begin my investigation immediately.”
Normally, if a noble paid such a ludicrous sum for their training, they would receive a warm welcome and due attention no matter how disliked they were. In light of this, House Razel’s treatment of Liam was far too harsh. As such, Amagi and Brian decided to launch their own investigations into this matter.

***

Up in space, we worked with several mining groups to tunnel into the rock. We reinforced the passageways we’d drilled out, then continued on. The humanoid machinery was very handy for this. I’d done this kind of work in my past life, but it was much more efficient than using mere human strength.
Feeling the vibrations through my suit as the stone was shaved away, I conversed through the comm with Kurt and Eila, who were in my group.

“This work’s too simple. It’s boring.”
“I agree with Liam. We’ve got three whole months left of this. I just wanna finish and go back to the surfaaace!”
But Kurt said, “It’s only three months. We can pull through.”
The Hot-Blooded Knight served as the site foreman, keeping an eye on us kids—strictly for our safety, no doubt. Even under his watchful eye, though, I didn’t intend to hold back on my grumbling. Other groups were complaining more often as well. Everyone was getting sick of this. Still, as long as we kept working, nobody got into trouble.
“I just want to get back to the surface too. The kids who stayed back on the planet are having parties every day, you know? Why can’t I do that?”
While I spoke, I kept up my work, moving the limbs of the humanoid machinery as if they were my own. Thanks to our skill with the machines, our work was proceeding faster than that of the other groups.
Eila laughed at my grumbling. “But they’re just tiresome parties to ‘practice etiquette,’ right? I don’t want to do that.”
Kurt agreed. “I feel the same way. I can never get used to parties; I’d prefer not to attend.”
Why haven’t these two made better use of their status as nobles? Nobles are supposed to make everything lavish and grand! Flaunting your wealth and indulging in parties while your subjects suffer is fun. Why wouldn’t you want to enjoy that?
“So you just have fun while you study etiquette? Well, *I* want to go. And the viscount is hosting the parties, so it’s not like it depletes my coffers.”
“Stingy as always, Liam,” Eila quipped.
Kurt seemed just as exasperated with me. He must’ve been the type of evil lord who preferred to hoard his wealth rather than flaunt it. *“Having fun isn’t exactly on my mind. Still, I guess I should get used to attending formal parties if it’s expected of me.”*
“Well, I wish I were at a bucket party right about now.” I was so bored, I started experimenting with more intricate ways to manipulate my machine.
Just then, Eila perked up. “Huh? Liam, have you been to a bucket party?! How was it? I’ve never been to one.”
She urged me to explain, but all I could tell her was that it made you consider the endless possibilities of buckets, and it would change the fundamental concept of buckets for you afterward.
“There’s no way I’m gonna be able to explain it to you. I’d like to host one myself someday, though.”
It was impossible for me to host a bucket party right now, the problem being that it wasn’t the sort of thing you could just put together with cash.
Kurt reacted with awe. “You’re amazing, Liam. A bucket party is too far above the station of House Exner. I’m sure I’ll never even see one.”
As we chatted, our work shift came to an end. The Hot-Blooded Knight sounded a siren, and all the humanoid machines ceased their labor.
“Finally finished!”

“We got a lot of work done again today.”
“What are we doing after this?”
The students all sighed with relief that their work had ended. The Hot-Blooded Knight ordered us back to our mothership.
“Come on, wrap it up, let’s pull out of here! And Liam…”
“Yes?”
“Don’t play around with your technique so much. I’ll admit you’ve got skill, but it’s dangerous to showboat.”
“Understood. Won’t happen again.”
“Huh… It’s rare for you to be so cooperative. Well, I’m sure it’s just lip service, but I’ll take it for now. I doubt I’d win a verbal sparring match against you.”
“You say that like I’m all talk.”
“I wish it were true. You’re a real handful, you know that?”
“Terribly sorry.”
Overhearing my playful exchange with the Hot-Blooded Knight, the kids around us all laughed. I did have some issues with being here, but these people weren’t terrible to be around. It was thanks to them that I didn’t actually have *too* many complaints.

***

This is strange.
Perched atop the roof of the viscount’s mansion, the Guide was checking in on Liam. He gazed straight up into the sky, staring right at Liam even with the vast chasm of space between them.
“Why are you having fun? You should be appalled at your treatment.”
The money and goods that Liam had brought with him had all essentially become the bounty of House Petack. His lavish school life had been stolen from him, and he was being treated like a destitute outcast instead. And yet, he appeared to be enjoying himself, and that frustrated the hell out of the Guide. If Liam was having a good time, the Guide certainly wasn’t. His chest ached, and his extremities had started to feel numb lately.
“How were my efforts not enough? I must do something more to push him down into the depths of despair. But what, dammit?”
No matter what the Guide did, he just couldn’t seem to improve his situation. He struggled to come up with his next move, but there wasn’t a lot he could accomplish with the little power he had left.
“Isn’t there *something* I can do? Anything at all?”
He lowered his gaze, head in his hands, and in doing so caught sight of Peter outside on the mansion grounds. Though it was the viscount’s mansion, the boy had been acting as if it were his own.
“I’ll use him! No, that wouldn’t work… He wouldn’t be able to beat Liam.”
The Guide gave up on making Peter his instrument.
“What, then? What can I do to make Liam miserable?”

Recalling Liam's happy face, the Guide sobbed with frustration.

***

On one of our laborious "training" days, I saw something blink at the edge of my cockpit monitor. It flashed in my periphery, but when I looked directly at the spot, I didn't find anything.
"I swear I saw a blip, but nothing's there…"
None of the machine's gauges indicated anything unusual, so I decided it must have been a trick of the eyes. Kurt and Eila, who were mining in a little cave alongside me, spoke to me over our comm link.
"Why'd you stop working, Liam?"
"Is there a problem? Want me to get someone?"
The two were worried about me, so I reassured them as I undid my cockpit harness.
"It's nothing. Keep a lookout, okay? I'm going outside."
"All right."
Kurt shifted his machine to shield me as I exited mine, so that no fragments of rock would hit me. Eila did the same.
"Be quick, okay? We can get in trouble for this."
"Don't worry, I'll talk my way out of it."
Safe in my space suit, I left my machine behind to investigate the blip. When I dug around in that area with my gloved hands, I discovered something.
"Is this a pendant? Looks like gold too." The pendant was beautiful; I'd found a real treasure. "This mining work isn't all bad." I especially liked that this artifact was made of gold.
I was tucking the pendant into a little pouch in my belt when something whizzed by in the corner of my eye.
"Was that a person? No…"
I felt slightly unsettled; I'd heard some ghost stories about old mines. I was surprised to learn that the same kinds of spooky stories from my past life existed here, but this place didn't really have a spooky air in my opinion.
If I remained outside any longer, I was sure to get yelled at by the Hot-Blooded Knight, so I decided to climb back into my cockpit.
"Well, whatever. At least I found a nice treasure today."

***

Nearly two years had passed since Liam first arrived at House Razel's domain. In that time, Tia had graduated from her university on the Imperial Home Planet and begun her training period as a government official.
Today, she was throwing a party. She'd invited her fellow knight candidates for House Banfield, who were working just as hard to earn their own qualifications. Men and women alike mingled and danced to the music. It

was a casual affair without any strict etiquette, so everyone was dressed comfortably.

At a glance, it was nothing more than a student get-together…until one took a look at the host's décor. Projected all along the walls were pictures and videos of Liam. Currently, they depicted his coming-of-age ceremony.

Why the fanatic displays? Surreal as they were, the partygoers were hardly put off by the images. On the contrary, they were completely engrossed. Even those who weren't watching the videos chatted next to a holographic model of Liam.

"How's your training going?"

"I'm just stuck at a desk for now."

"The military academy is pretty much the same."

"Well, the real fun doesn't start till after this training period!"

Despite their discussions about training, the conversations didn't get too serious, remaining casual in tone. They mostly swapped stories about busywork.

Tia gazed at Liam's three-dimensional figure. It struck a few different poses, and she was entranced by each one of them.

“Ah, I love it. It’s so soothing watching Lord Liam’s gallant figure.”
One of Tia’s friends caught her gushing over the figure and pinched her cheek.
“Ow! What was that for?” Tia asked, though she hardly seemed upset.
“Stop gawking at that thing and tell me your plans. You’re gonna go pick up Lord Liam after your training, right?”
“Of course. When I’m done, I’m taking a year off and accompanying him back to his domain. I’m so excited to finally see him in person again.”
Her friend simmered with jealousy. “If I hadn’t drawn the wrong lot, I could have gone with you.”
“My condolences. But don’t worry—I’ll take plenty of videos.”
“You’d better. Ugh, I want to see videos of Lord Liam *during* his training too. I’m sure a few of those will pop up later, so let’s hope you’ll be lucky enough to get a hold of them.”
When her friend went on to say she’d do anything to obtain pictures or videos of Liam’s time in training, Tia agreed wholeheartedly. “I’d like them too, but there’s not much we can do if another house owns them. Oh, I wish I could see Lord Liam right now.”
The backdrop was so abnormal that Tia, even with her hands clasped together excitedly and her eyes sparkling with life, hardly looked like a normal girl.

***

“Fanatics?”
After work, I ate with Kurt and Eila in the dining hall. We were talking about Kurt’s father, and the boy in question hung his head, embarrassed to be discussing family matters.
“Y-yeah. This might sound conceited, but my father was a celebrated mobile knight pilot. A lot of soldiers and other knights looked up to him.”
Eila nodded in understanding. “Your father’s name spread through the whole Empire, so pretty much everyone’s heard of him.”
“Huh? Really?” I was surprised—and a little envious—to hear that, but Kurt hardly looked happy about it.
“His legacy earned him loads more fans, and there are scores of knights who want to serve him.”
Eila tilted her head to the side, a spoon in her mouth. “Isn’t that good?”
“No, it’s not! Ugh…I’m sorry.”
At Kurt’s outburst, the students around us looked up in surprise, but they quickly lost interest and went back to eating. One small group, however, was giving us strange looks. They weren’t malicious, so I ignored them and urged Kurt to continue.
“Is there a problem?” I asked him.

“More than one, I’d say. A bunch of knights and soldiers want to serve my father because they look up to him, which normally would be fine, but some of them are real zealots and fanatics. That alone is a huge headache.”
I exchanged a glance with Eila. I wasn’t getting this “fanatic” thing. “Well, if they cause problems, why not just boot them out?”
“We can’t since we’re so in need of manpower right now. But recently, hidden camera footage of my father has gotten out, and it’s been a real issue.”
Nobles tended to have personal guards to protect them from potential assassinations. Normally, they were very proactive about security, so the fact that someone had managed to slip past and film him in secret was a cause for alarm.
Curious, Eila asked for more details. “How’d they do it?”
“We don’t know, but there must be at least one conspirator close to my father. The video keeps getting updated, and now some of *my* personal belongings have gone missing.”
It was no wonder Kurt was at his wits’ end.
It’s creepy, these obsessed fans collecting videos of some old dude and putting them out there like he’s some mega celebrity. Past me never would’ve understood this. Actually, is he akin to an idol or something? That gives me an idea…
“You can beef up security, but I can think of one other solution.”
“Really?!” Kurt looked to me like I was a port in a storm. It felt kinda nice.
“Change your way of looking at things. The candid videos are getting out because of a leak in security, but if you were to release them officially, you’d actually benefit.”
They just had to market the guy as an idol. I told Kurt this, and he frowned.
“Would that really work?”
“All you need to do to stop piracy is make the official version more widely available. If the videos have your father’s seal of approval, his fans will want to get their hands on those over the unofficial versions, no question.”
Well, the secret footage would probably still have some kind of audience, but I’ll keep quiet about that.
“Got it. If you think that’ll do it, I’ll bring it up to my father. I really am grateful for all the help you give me, Liam.” To show his appreciation, Kurt grasped my hand, so I made a show of my magnanimity.
“Don’t worry about it—friends help each other out, right? But it sounds like overly loyal knights and soldiers can be a problem sometimes. Guess I’ll look out for that myself.”
“Probably a good idea.”
We resumed eating…but the food here was terrible. Vegetables grown at the mining colony were part of the meal, including a really bitter thing that vaguely resembled a green pepper. I pushed it to the side of my plate, and Eila laughed.
“C’mon, eat your vegetables.”

“They’re too bitter. Seriously, this is impossible. You want ’em, Kurt?”
Kurt rolled his eyes, but he still took the vegetables from my plate. “I’ll eat them. I’d feel bad letting them go to waste, but you really should eat them yourself, Liam.”
“There’s a limit to how gross food can be. This thing’s so bitter, it’s practically inedible!”
I wasn’t just being a picky eater; the things were seriously disgusting. In fact, they were so bad that I was starting to feel sorry for the populace who had to eat them on a regular basis. Was this the best an intergalactic empire could do for its workers? Were they trying to say gourmet food was an immoral indulgence? House Razel was just too awful.
When Kurt started eating my green pepper things, I heard strange laughter coming from somewhere around us.
“What was that?” No matter how hard I searched, I couldn’t find the source.

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A pair of hungry eyes watched Kurt and Liam grasp hands and share each other’s food.
A little more… Just a little more! Heh heh heh. Oh, I just couldn’t help giggling when I saw it.
One girl in the dining hall was intent on observing the two boys. The girls seated behind her pretended not to be spying, instead keeping their attention on the mysterious figure as she eavesdropped on Kurt and Liam’s conversation.
More. I need more…
This girl was planning something, and Liam and Kurt were in her crosshairs.

Chapter 5:
Unwelcome Reunion

A VISITOR ARRIVED on the resource asteroid that House Razel had repurposed into a space colony. His name was Yasushi.

Yasushi, who wore a kimono with some conspicuous tears in it and hakama trousers, walked with his shoulders hunched. His shaggy hair was unkempt, and his facial hair was wild and wiry. He was quite thin, perhaps malnourished. The man had the look of a filthy wandering samurai, but he was the same swordsman who'd taught Liam the Way of the Flash.

However, there *was* no such thing as the Way of the Flash. It was a fake style, a fabrication created by Yasushi. The unsuspecting Liam had taken the training seriously and perfected the technique himself, transforming the lie into truth. When he witnessed the results of Liam's training, Yasushi had grown frightened of the boy and fled House Banfield.

In other words, although Yasushi was the originator of the fake sword style, his actual skills—or lack thereof—were such that he could easily lose to a child studying authentic martial arts.

Yasushi was always looking for a way to make some cash, and his trip to House Razel's resource asteroid was no exception.

He muttered to himself, "Should have told me upfront I needed a license for heavy machinery! I've been in a mobile knight before, you know! Well, just inside one… Never took it to a fight. Damn, I'm not gonna make any money showing off my tricks here… What am I supposed to do?"

Although Yasushi was a swindler, his scams were shabby and no longer turned a profit. He had heard that House Razel was hiring laborers and, with no other options, had come seeking work. Upon arrival, however, he learned he would need a license to work here and was left to wander aimlessly.

"I used all my funds just to get here, so I haven't eaten anything in a whole day."

Miscreant that he was, Yasushi staggered through the entertainment district despite having no money to his name. He'd already traded the sword from his hip for cash, and now he had nothing left to sell.

"I don't care who it is, could somebody just buy me a drink?"

With that desperate comment, he lurched forward and bumped into a flashy-looking trio who were walking in the other direction.

"Hey, watch where you're freakin' walkin'!"

"Ow, man! That hurt!"

"What's wrong with you? Dude, you hurt my li'l bro! You don't think you're gonna get away with that, do you?"

He'd run into a nasty bunch. Onlookers familiar with the trio muttered things like, "Them again," and backed away. They merely watched the scene unfold, preferring not to get involved.
Surrounded by the three punks, Yasushi couldn't get away. "I-It was an accident!" he protested, but it was futile.
"Is that all you have to say? I guess we're gonna have to get a little rough with you to teach you a lesson."
"Bro! Let's take this guy to a back-alley doc and sell his organs!"
"Great idea!"
Yasushi paled as the three punks laughed crudely. He could tell they weren't joking—they would actually do it.
These guys are bad news! Why is House Razel's domain so dangerous?
Talking wouldn't get him out of this. Cowering before the villainous trio, Yasushi put his hands together and prayed. *Someone help me!*
Suddenly, there was a commotion nearby, but the trio ignored it as they lunged at Yasushi.
"Anybody who disrespects us dies!"
Just then, a familiar voice interjected: "Who's killing whom here?"
A chill settled over them, and Yasushi looked past his attackers at the interloper. Though he had grown a little taller since the last time Yasushi had seen him, the person standing behind the three men was an utterly unwelcome visitor.
God, not him! Anyone but hiiim!
The three goons turned around and faced Liam. In his hand was one of the shock swords the students used for practice, little more than a toy. When they saw it, the three men guffawed and pulled handguns out of their pockets.
"It's just a kid! Look at him playin' tough, standin' up to us with a toy. C'mon, kid, you don't wanna get hurt, do—"
Before he could finish, the man who'd started speaking was cut off—literally. His severed head dropped to the ground. Yasushi trembled violently, and a chill shot down his spine. He hadn't even seen what Liam had done, but he understood it perfectly.
H-he's gotten stronger than before.
Liam must have continued to improve during the time they'd been apart, and he was now more terrifying than ever. While he couldn't estimate the boy's power, Yasushi could feel it in his bones. Just as he had back in House Banfield's domain, Yasushi felt an overwhelming urge to flee. However, it was too late to run; he was in range of the boy's sword.
Oh…it's over for me.
Sensing that his life was finished, Yasushi's emotions transcended fear. He already felt he was looking at the scene from a distance as a ghost.
The remaining two punks were in shock, gaping at their headless companion. "H-hey, what happened?" they asked the dead man.

Liam approached them, and before they could give excuses for their behavior or beg for their lives, their heads took flight. Blood spewed out, and an onlooker screamed. Yasushi was screaming too, on the inside, but with Liam turning toward him, he had to prepare himself for the inevitable.
Well, can't say I lived an honest life.
He was sure Liam had eventually realized his lies and was furious with him. His life would be ended here, the same as the three scoundrels, and Yasushi made his peace with that.
Liam stood before Yasushi as the commotion around them grew and the stench of blood filled the air. The onlookers probably thought Yasushi would be beheaded next. But Liam put his weapon away and, unconcerned by the blood pooling on the ground, knelt down in front of Yasushi.
"It's good to see you again, Master!"
Seeing the boy kneeling in front of him with his head bowed, Yasushi felt his sanity stretch thin.
Huh? What the hell? Why are you bowing your head to me? Please, stop! It's scary!
On the outside, Yasushi was still paralyzed with fear and confusion. Frozen on his face was the expression of acceptance he'd adopted as he awaited his death blow. His countenance thus unchanged, he looked bold and wise as he said, "I'm relieved to find you well, Lord Liam."
At this moment, Yasushi looked like an actual swordmaster. The pathetic old man who was down on his luck was nowhere to be seen.
"I've continued my training faithfully, working hard every day to catch up to you, Master!"
"That's admirable. I could tell from your technique just now that you've improved. You truly have been working hard."
"Th-thank you!" Liam was practically choked up with emotion. He then asked Yasushi the obvious question. "By the way, do you live here, Master?"
How should Yasushi answer? If he played this the wrong way, Liam would find out where he lived, and he couldn't let that happen. Yasushi thought fast, desperate to live just a little bit longer. "Actually, I'm…traveling."
"Traveling? Er, but what are you doing in a place like this without your sword? I mean, I know there's no need for me to worry about you, but I still think you should carry a weapon."
I sold it! Yasushi thought. I sold it 'cause I don't have any money! I wish I could just tell him that!
"I left with only the clothes on my back."
"Why?" Liam's question was only reasonable.
Yasushi resisted the urge to hold his head in his hands as he tried to think of an excuse. Then, he said the only thing that came to mind. "I was searching for a student."
This is it! This is all I've got! He was traveling to find a fresh understudy.
Liam smiled at this, his expression one of absolute trust, and made Yasushi a proposal.

“I want to build a dojo just for you in my domain, Master. You can devote yourself to nurturing the next generation there.”
Yasushi couldn’t possibly accept Liam’s offer. If he stayed at House Banfield again, the boy would inevitably discover the truth sooner or later.
“No, that won’t do.”
I caaan’t! Your domain is the one place I can’t go!
“Huh? Wh-why not?” Liam looked disappointed.
Aaargh! Come on, brain! Gimme something good already!
With his brain failing him, Yasushi let his mouth take over. “I’m not searching for just any old student. I’m searching for one to truly perfect the Flash.”
“Perfect it? The Way of the Flash hasn’t been perfected yet?”
The Way of the Flash that Liam had perfected was pretty close to unbeatable, but if Yasushi told him that, the boy would persist in dragging him back to his domain. He had to avoid that at all costs.
“It’s not!” he replied firmly, panicking on the inside. After Yasushi shouted at him, Liam just quietly waited for further explanation.
Yasushi couldn’t give him a stupid excuse here, so he had to come up with something that sounded legitimate. He said, “There is no final destination on the road of the warrior! Striving endlessly forward is the Way of the Flash.”
Liam looked deeply moved by Yasushi’s words, so he guessed the boy had bought it.
“I was foolish, Master. Please, let me help you find your student.”
Yasushi was pissed, but he couldn’t let it show. I don’t want you anywhere near me! Please just figure that out! Wait, no… If he figures that out, I’m deaaad!
“One must find a student on their own to master the true Way of the Flash. Actually, each master must raise up at least three students. You were my first, Lord Liam. I plan to train two more.”
Before Liam could ask the obvious question of, “Well, why don’t you look in my domain?” Yasushi went on.
“This is the duty of one who has inherited the Way of the Flash, Lord Liam.”
“Duty?”
“Yes. I will pass the Way of the Flash on to my students, and you must find three of your own to train as well.”
“I-Is that so?” Liam said, surprised.
Yasushi fought back the urge to tell him, *No, I just made that up right now!*
“But I wouldn’t meddle in your teaching. I would never!”
“I have my Way of the Flash, and you have yours, Lord Liam. They may one day merge, but today is not that day. The universe is vast. If we do not set out in search of new possibilities, the Way of the Flash will stagnate.”
Liam hung his head. “I had no idea about any of this, Master. I was so short-sighted.”

Yasushi was relieved by Liam's reaction, but this wasn't enough for him.
Just one more push. I've gotta make sure he doesn't come after me.
"This duty is not mine alone. As I said, since you have a full mastery, you too must pass on the Way of the Flash, Lord Liam. You must train three students, and it cannot be just anyone. You are to entrust the Way of the Flash only to those you deem truly worthy. Take this as an important mission, as a master of the Way of the Flash. Raising students up is just another part of your own training!"
It seemed Liam was still digesting this part of Yasushi's spiel. He was flustered, and his eyes were unfocused. "I have to train students too? Do you think I can do that?"
Yasushi smiled and put a hand on the nervous boy's shoulder. He looked just like a mentor guiding an anxious student, but that wasn't how he felt on the inside.
How should I know? The Way of the Flash doesn't even exist! Things have only gotten this complicated because you somehow made it a reality!
The Way of the Flash had grown from his lie, but Yasushi wanted no responsibility for it.
"You're a fine swordsman now," he told Liam. "Don't doubt yourself. I'm sure you'll develop fine students."
"Yes, Master. I'll give it a shot."
Liam's eyes brimmed with tears. He was obviously touched by Yasushi's words, but this was the same boy who'd mercilessly cut down three men a few minutes ago, villains though they may have been. Yasushi wasn't happy about this in the slightest.
He still can't see through my lies! I think I've talked my way through this now, but I can't run away from him because I don't have any money to get off this asteroid. Crap, what am I supposed to do?
But Liam had a proposal for him.
"As your student, I can't just let you go off looking for a student without lending you my assistance. It won't be much, but please allow me to provide you with some traveling funds at the very least." He was offering up money without even having been asked.
Heart soaring, the con man suppressed a grin. "I'd appreciate that. I'll make good use of it."
Yes! Now I can get away from here!
Liam manipulated his personal tablet and transferred some electronic funds to Yasushi. As he stared at the amount on his own device's screen, the color drained from Yasushi's face.
Huh? What's with this number? There're a ton of zeros here.
Yasushi desperately tried to maintain his composure at having received such an unbelievable amount of money.
"It's quite a sum."
"Well, my finances have improved a lot lately. Oh, the commotion around here is getting a little intense."

Naturally, people were going to crowd around after a triple murder in an entertainment district. Liam decided to let Yasushi get away before dealing with the situation.
“Just leave this to me, Master.”
Yasushi took this chance and scurried away, but he made sure to give Liam a fitting parting remark as he left.
“I’m grateful, Lord Liam. Be well.”
Liam smiled bashfully. “Yes, sir.”

***

After I saw my master off, I puzzled over this new assignment.
“Three students, eh? And only those who are really worthy? If it can’t be just anyone, what am I gonna do?”
I had to do my part to spread the Way of the Flash, but if I was the only one who could teach it, I wouldn’t be able to open a dojo and simply leave things to an instructor.
“I guess I’ll have to go and find my students myself. His words really hit home… I have to follow his example.”
It had surprised me to find him surrounded by punks like that, but Master would have been able to get out of that situation even if I hadn’t stepped in. He’d seemed completely at ease even without a weapon. That level of calm could only come from the strong. I aimed to become an evil lord, but I wanted Master to continue walking down the path of the warrior.
“You talk to yourself a lot,” someone said.
The Hot-Blooded Knight had come to visit me in jail. Looking disgusted, he said something to the guard, who then left us alone.
“I didn’t expect that the little commotion you caused was because of a *murder*.”
“I apologize.”
The colony’s entertainment district was there for the laborers, but a lot of villains and punks—like the trio I’d disposed of—frequented that area as well. I’d been tormented by punks like that in my previous life, so I tended to get heated when I ran into them.
“I looked into the men you killed, and they didn’t have the best reputation. Frankly, it’s surprising they hadn’t already been arrested,” the Hot-Blooded Knight told me. Evidently, he’d done some research.
If they hadn’t picked a fight with my master, I wouldn’t have fought back. Well, they already put one foot in the grave when they’d decided to go after him. I mean, my master was even stronger than me. What idiots.
“Message from Lord Randolph: ‘Cool your head in that cell for a little while.’”
“Message received. I’ll do so.”
I had a lot of thinking to do about this understudy business, so having some time to myself was pretty convenient.

***

As it turned out, the trio Liam killed had been part of a space pirate gang. In their lair on the asteroid, the group's remaining members were in an uproar over their cohorts' murders.

"You gotta be kidding me! You wanna just let him go 'cause he's a noble, bro?"

Enraged, the other pirates wanted to kill Liam in retaliation.

The one who'd been called "bro" slammed his fist on a table. "You idiot! If we kill a young noble, it'll drag our reputation through the mud!"

These individuals belonged to the largest pirate gang in Viscount Razel's territory. They'd made a name for themselves, and they didn't want to do anything to ruin it.

Amid the hotheads, one relatively calm man piped up, "This kid's a guest of House Razel. He's here for his training. If we wanna make a move, we'd better be prepared."

"We can't attack if we don't know who we're going up against. Killing him would be easy enough, but we don't want any major repercussions for it. Can anyone find out who he is?"

A pirate raised his hand. "There's a special guest who comes to the casino. He's the heir to House Petack, but he owes us some serious dosh. We might be able to get the info out of him."

"Good, get close to him. Use whatever you need to coax a name out of him—booze, women, money, anything. We're gonna make the kid pay."

The pirates would tread carefully and research their opponent before making a move.

"He might be a noble, but he can't expect to go on living after standing up to us."

Swapping smirks, they swore revenge against Liam. They had all the confidence of the crime lords of the territory.

***

A convoy from the Henfrey Company was on its way to Viscount Razel's territory.

On his own ship, Thomas addressed his men. "Lord Liam's name has no sway on the pirates here, correct?"

Liam's name alone would see Henfrey ships safely through House Banfield's territory and the surrounding areas where he'd devastated pirate bands, but his deeds had not yet reached the distant domain of House Razel.

"Well, they let us go with just a toll, at least," one of the Henfrey employees said, referencing what had happened earlier. "You might be right, though. Y'know, I think Lord Razel has ties to pirates."

Thomas was thinking the same thing. He'd used his mercantile connections to do some digging, and he'd learned that the area surrounding Razel's domain saw frequent pirate attacks on everyone except the viscount's personal merchants. The pirates didn't do much damage, but they were operating out in the open. Thomas and his staff weren't the only ones who thought so either.

"Well, hopefully, Liam can make connections with House Razel to improve this pirate situation."

However, they couldn't meet with Liam even if they made it safely to Viscount Razel's domain. Meeting with noble children during their training was highly discouraged, and if they tried to force their way in, Liam's reputation would suffer.

"I want to discuss the matter with Lord Liam, but I don't think we'll be able to until his training is over."

Thomas's employee sighed. "I dunno how much House Razel would be worth as an associate, anyway. Maybe we shouldn't bother trying to do business with the likes of them."

"It's not our job to make that decision," Thomas admonished him. "I trust Lord Liam's judgment."

So what would Liam say on the matter? Thomas and his men were anxious to find out, considering their concerns about Viscount Razel.

"I'd heard he was a lord with a good reputation, but I guess rumors can't be trusted. I just hope he doesn't have a bad influence on Lord Liam."

Noble children learned many things during their three-year training period, and their lessons weren't always good. If the more unsavory rumors about House Razel were true, and the viscount really did do business with criminals, Thomas dearly hoped that Liam wouldn't learn to imitate him.

***

Humans could live on all sorts of planets. Still influenced by the values of my previous life, I preferred planets that left a good amount of nature untouched as they developed. I didn't care for places like the Imperial Home Planet, all concrete and machines.

Every planet had different characteristics. As such, they couldn't be governed in the same way. Ruling nobles took those characteristics into consideration and came up with policies to go along with them.

Viscount Razel, who had ample resources at his disposal, specialized in mining and processing metals to make his profit. Because of all this mining, however, there'd been considerable environmental destruction in his domain, and the cities on his planet needed to rely on arcology to address this. Personally, I struggled to understand Viscount Razel's approach, but he'd managed to develop his territory using that method.

Our time mining in space finally came to an end, and we entered the third year of our schooling. We were finally back on the House Razel home world.

Today, the Hot-Blooded Knight was teaching us about governing in a fairly traditional classroom.
Once our lesson ended, we were free for the day. As the other students got up from their desks, Kurt remained seated, a thoughtful expression on his face.
“A planet rich in resources, huh? I’m honestly jealous.”
Viscount Razel’s domain was blessed with ample resources. As the heir to House Exner, which had so little in comparison, Kurt was green with envy. I figured he was yearning for something his domain could benefit from.
I said, “Seems to me he’s relied too much on mining and processing; he hasn’t put any money into his military. Can’t say I approve.”
I frowned upon the idea of assembling only the bare minimum military force. Besides, the viscount had punched the very planet he lived on full of holes. Efficiency couldn’t come at the cost of literally everything else. As an evil lord, I felt it was just as important to focus on appearances, pointless as it might seem. Long story short: If you wanted to be a real villain, you couldn’t skimp on your military.
“You’re harsh, Liam. I want at least one resource asteroid. You can always turn it into a colony or use it for something else after you’ve finished mining it.”
As things stood with House Exner right now, they wouldn’t be able to attain anything like that.
“Too bad your domain still has it rough.”
“Still, things have gotten a lot better thanks to your advice, Liam. My dad is really grateful.”
I hadn’t expected him to thank me so much just for asking Thomas to lend them some money, but if they were going to be in my debt, I’d be sure to cash that in someday.

***

The students who received special treatment from House Razel, like Peter, had stayed planetside for their second year of school instead of going into space. When they entered their third year, they received lessons in governance from Viscount Razel himself. Learning directly from a currently ruling noble was a valuable experience.
Although these students brought drinks and snacks to class and chomped away while they listened, Viscount Razel didn’t scold them. Yes, they were here to study, but they were also his guests. He thought of hosting children purely as a business move, and he always gave a subset of these children special treatment that a traditional learning institution never could.
At the moment, Viscount Razel was lecturing the children on having to make allowances for the inevitable evil elements in one’s territory along with the good.

“The most important aspect of managing a domain is balance—an equilibrium of good and evil. Space pirates are a good example. The vast majority of local pirates are former subjects of one’s own domain. Some nobles make it their business to strike pirates down, but they’ve got it all wrong. They don’t understand that pirates are born from nigh-unavoidable circumstances.”

He explained that most people only became pirates because they had no other recourse in their lives.

“Many nobles have the simplistic idea that they should destroy such outlaws and that it’s their just deserts, but true justice is ruling without creating pirates in the first place.”

One girl raised her hand. “How do you treat pirates, then, Lord Razel?” Her question was simple, and the viscount was all too eager to answer.

“Good question. Crude thugs must be dealt with, but other pirates use their heads. These individuals prove useful, sometimes even necessary in controlling the criminal underworld. Hence, the wise thing to do is to join forces with them for the benefit of your domain.”

Some students exchanged nervous glances. Naturally, they were suspicious of a noble openly telling them to work hand in hand with pirates.

“Isn’t a noble’s duty to protect their domain and their people?”

“Absolutely! But sometimes, you must get your hands a little dirty in order to do so. Being righteous and honorable is all well and good, but the world doesn’t run on platitudes alone.”

The children were surprised to hear such unconventional advice, and they expressed their interest with excitement.

I’ve reeled them in.

This approach was Viscount Razel’s forte. By opening his lectures with a shocking statement, he was able to seize the children’s interest.

“A lord’s job *should* be making sure no one becomes a pirate, but when various factors make that impossible, then it might be more efficient to just control the pirates, no?”

That was when Peter, who usually showed no interest in his lessons, piped up, “I get it. It’s like that back at my domain too.”

Viscount Razel found Peter’s comment unexpected. From his investigation of House Petack, the family seemed to hunt pirates aggressively. He’d thought the boy would frown upon his views, but seeing Peter agree with him made the viscount smile.

“Is it? Well, hearing this makes me all the more confident that our two houses will have a nice, long relationship. Now, back to our topic. By tolerating some amount of evil, you can prevent far more damage in the long run.”

It would be a major problem for pirates to attack merchant ships and pick them clean, but what if they just charged a toll for safe passage? He explained this concept, then concluded with:

“A proper government manages its pirates as well.”

All the students listened to Viscount Razel intently, hanging on his every word.

***

Meanwhile, Thomas had just returned to the Henfrey Company headquarters when he was troubled by another request for a loan.
“House Petack, of all people?”
He had run a quick background check on House Petack and was horrified by their reputation. The family was in as much trouble as House Banfield had been before Liam took charge, and they clearly had no intention of paying back any loan they received. They were doing nothing to repay the tremendous debts they’d already accumulated, while the lord and everyone close to him continued to live in luxury. They were the quintessential ruined house with no future.
House Petack’s military was the biggest problem—nearly all their troops were pirates. If the Henfrey Company didn’t comply, the implication was that House Petack would use force to get what they wanted. Normally, Thomas would rely on Liam’s support, but he couldn’t do that this time around.
“It would affect Lord Liam’s training if the Henfrey Company sparked a war,” he explained to his staff.
If they used House Banfield’s name to defend themselves, and House Petack retaliated, it could mean war—and that would only cause trouble for Liam. His training was still ongoing, and his schedule was packed thereafter; he needed to stay focused. Unluckily, the Petack boy was also studying in House Razel’s domain, so word would travel fast.
The last thing Thomas wanted to do was pull him away from all that to aid in a war that could’ve easily been avoided, especially after all Liam had done for him.
“It’s completely obvious that they don’t intend to repay us…” he muttered to himself. “It might be flushing money down the drain, but we have no other choice.”
Thomas heaved a sigh, lamenting the fact that they’d caught the attention of a troublesome house.

***

After class, Peter sneaked out of the Razel mansion and headed for an entertainment district inside the walls of the self-contained city. Nestled between the district’s shadowy twists and turns was an underground casino run by pirates who were connected to House Razel. Peter made frequent visits to this casino, where he was waited on by flashy women in gorgeous dresses as he gambled.

He threw his cards down on the table before him, declaring his loss. “I lose again! That’s three in a row! I’m gonna play something else today.”
A man in a garish suit approached Peter, a big smile plastered on his face. “How goes it today, Lord Peter?”
Peter drained the booze from his glass, then wrapped his arms around the waists of two beautiful women, pulling them closer. Despite his lavish surroundings, he grimaced.
“I keep losing again, so I’m all out of pocket money. Put this on my tab, would you?”
“I’m afraid your tab has grown a bit too much at this point. Would you mind settling now?”
“What? Well, just ask the viscount for it, then.”
Peter often used Viscount Razel’s name to get what he wanted when he visited the casino, but the viscount let him get away with it, so the pirates running the casino overlooked his behavior. This time, however, they’d approached him with the intention of getting something from him in return.
“That might harm your reputation, Lord Peter. What would you say to giving us some information instead?”
At this opportunity to square his account, Peter accepted without a second thought. “Sure. What do you want to know?”
The man in the suit was a little taken aback by the boy’s immediate agreement, but he got right down to business. “We happen to be investigating Lord Banfield at the moment.”
Peter was presented with a holographic display of Liam, but he barely spared it a glance. “Huh? I don’t know this guy.”
The man in the suit bristled, but he patiently explained, “We know he’s staying at the mansion under the viscount’s care. You really don’t know him?”
“Well, there’re a lot of kids staying at the viscount’s place. If he’s not receiving special treatment like I am, then he’s probably just some third-rate noble with no prospects.”
The corners of the man’s mouth pulled up at this, as if he’d heard exactly what he wanted to know. “If you let us in on a few more details, Lord Peter, we’ll give you special service for your help.”
The man snapped his fingers, and a group of maybe twenty beautiful women appeared around Peter.
Peter spread his arms, clearly pleased by the sight. “Just leave it to me!”
“We’re counting on you, Lord Peter.”
The smile tugging at the man’s lips was terribly sinister.

***

The Hot-Blooded Knight brought us to a little bar on the city’s outskirts. It was a family-friendly sort of place run by an old lady and a middle-aged woman. As the knight indulged in karaoke, belting out some sort of ballad, I

sat at the bar grumbling to Kurt and Eila—though she had pretty much invited herself.
“Why are we here? Couldn’t he have brought us somewhere a little more upscale? Or at least a place with beautiful women!”
Kurt shot a look at Eila while I complained. “You know, there’s a girl with us right now. Maybe you should watch your words a little.”
Eila, meanwhile, was completely engrossed in the food the old woman had brought us. She looked over at me while chewing on something from a skewer. “Don’t worry about me. I know how boys talk.”
The Hot-Blooded Knight had rounded up all the boys for this outing. Eila had heard about it and volunteered to come along, even though the other girls had gone on a different outing with a female instructor.
“Yeah, don’t worry about it, Kurt. It’s Eila’s fault for muscling her way into this group anyway,” I said.
“That’s right,” Eila agreed.
“Really?” Kurt didn’t seem to know how to respond to that.
The old lady behind the counter looked at me and laughed. “You fancy noble types don’t care for my establishment, eh?”
Well, the bar *did* have good food. The middle-aged woman rolled her eyes when she saw me devouring it.
“Young kids sure do eat a lot.”
We’d been told we were going somewhere for a bit of fun, but we’d been brought to this little dive. I felt I had a right to be displeased—aside from the food.
“This is good. I’ll take another order.”
“Sure thing.”
While I requested more food, the Hot-Blooded Knight started hollering a new song, swinging his fist to the music.
Once Eila finished her food, she asked us, “Where’s *your* idea of a fun place, then?”
For a moment Kurt was speechless. “I don’t think girls need to know those kinds of things.”
“I don’t mind. Doesn’t bother me.”
Kurt was endlessly mystified by Eila’s guilelessness.
Rather than respond right away, I backed things up a bit. “First of all, there aren’t enough places to have some *real* fun in the viscount’s domain. I mean, how many can you think of?”
There was the shady entertainment district, but other than that, it felt like there were too few places to go within the arcological cities. My boss had dragged me around to entertainment districts with far more establishments in my previous life.
Kurt blushed. “I-I don’t know what you want *me* to tell you.”
Eila said, “Come on, you can be honest. Look, everyone needs to eat, sleep, and have sex to be healthy.”
“M-maybe, but…”

Sating the three great appetites was important for both body and mind. I didn't have patience for those who were more concerned with propriety than living as nature intended.

In my previous life, I'd been diligent to a fault. I'd only been taken to places like this by my employers. I'd barely had any fun, prioritizing my family above all else, but now that I looked back on my behavior, I found it idiotic. I regretted it and wished I'd indulged myself more.

Human beings were faithful to their desires, and a ruling lord had to make sure there were places to satisfy them. I was fond of such businesses because they greatly contributed to the economy. *I really should invest in more of those places when I get back home.*

The old woman nodded when she heard what I had to say. "You're young, but you seem to get how things work around here. You're right—you can't get by in this world by being prim and proper all the time. It's healthier for people if they have outlets for their urges, so make sure you pay attention to 'em. You should indulge while you're young." She cackled.

I was impressed by her savvy. "I like you, old lady. I'm in a good mood, so let me give you a tip." I tried to hand her some money, but she gave me a cold look.

"Don't need it. Order something instead."

"Well, okay. How about you bring a second helping of food to every table."

During our back-and-forth, Kurt's head had hung low.

"What's up with you?"

"Just realizing how much I'm lacking."

It looked to me like Kurt, who'd been focused solely on squeezing money out of his subjects, had finally realized that you could use people's appetites for profit. *Good, it makes me happy to see that you're learning.* But there was a problem I couldn't ignore. Kurt was just too serious, and I suspected he lacked personal experience in this area.

"Anyway, are you a virgin?"

"Pfft!"

Kurt bent over in a coughing fit, and Eila narrowed her eyes at him. Maybe I shouldn't have asked that question in front of a girl? And yet, I sensed she was interested in his answer. *Oh? Is Eila after Kurt?* I pushed harder, trying to tease him.

"C'mon, you can tell me. Hey, you're a noble. You can have anyone you want, whenever you want."

"Wh-what are you saying, Liam?! We'll have fiancées one day! You have to be faithful."

"'Faithful'? That's one of the words I trust least in this world."

My reward for being "faithful" in the past had been a terrible life. Faithfulness was only a virtue from other people's point of view.

"Wh-why? Faithfulness is a good thing. You're unfaithful, Liam."

"What was that?"

He aspires to be an evil lord, but he wants to be loyal to just one woman? Boy, he is the serious type. Clearly his sole priority is how much money he can get out of his citizens. He's definitely not the same as me. I'm driven by all my lusts.

Having accused me of being unfaithful, Kurt asked me, "S-so…do you have experience with women, Liam? From how you talk, it sounds like you've been with more than a couple."

"Well, obviously, I—huh?"

I wanted to say it was obvious, but then something dawned on me. Hold on a second. Who have I laid my hands on since I reincarnated into this world? Just Amagi. In other words, I hadn't gotten physical with a real woman. Do androids count in this world?

Kurt looked relieved when he saw me sink into thought. He must have taken comfort in the fact that his friend hadn't climbed the stairs to adulthood yet either.

"See? You say all this stuff, but you're the same as me, Liam! I thought it was weird. I couldn't picture a serious guy like you fooling around."

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm not that kind of guy!"

Everyone's eyes turned to us as I bickered with Kurt, and I overheard people whispering.

"Are they virgins?"

"They're virgins!"

"No, those guys might be…you know."

Are you kidding? I can't be a virgin—my reputation as an evil lord is on the line here! I've got plenty of experience, just…not with a real woman! They probably wouldn't accept that excuse. People didn't think highly of androids and maid robots in the Empire. That attitude didn't sit right with me, but how could I change it? If I admitted I'd lost my virginity to a maid robot, many people would make fun of me. I didn't know if I could stop myself from cutting my tormentors down in anger.

The smart move seemed to be grabbing the bull by the horns. "Listen, what do you say we go have some fun right now, then?"

"Huh?! No, I, er…" Kurt's voice faded into nothing, but I grinned, amused by his nervousness.

"There's nothing wrong with losing your virginity right now. As long as I can't substantiate my claims, a virgin I'll remain. It's fine. As long as you don't admit it to your future fiancée, you'll still be faithful."

Hearing this, Eila muttered, "That's *not* faithful."

I ignored her and put my hand on Kurt's shoulder. "What do you say? We'll both give it up, okay?"

"Er, but…" Kurt was blushing furiously. He clearly needed one more push.

What a pain. Just say you'll go already.

Just as Kurt was about to say yes, Eila spoke up. "I think you two should show a little more self-control."

“Don’t be stupid. Now you’re gonna act all proper? What happened to everyone needing to eat, sleep, and have sex to be healthy?”
Eila smirked. “Look, I’m gonna tell you this because I’m worried about you two. Just so you know…there’s an STD running rampant in Viscount Razel’s domain right now.”
Why does she look so happy about it? And isn’t this a futuristic fantasy world? Humans must have wiped out STDs by now.
“You think you can scare us off with something like that?” I snorted. “In this high-tech world of ours, are you suggesting human ingenuity hasn’t conquered STDs?”
Eila covered her mouth, trying to muffle her laugh. “Oho ho ho, how are you so naïve, my dear Liam? There are plenty of illnesses medicine can’t cure in this day and age; they’re always evolving. Have you never heard of medicinal herbs that used to cure sicknesses losing effectiveness over time?”
“What?”
“Plus, this new disease going around the viscount’s territory is really something else. The thing is…”
Eila described this virus to us in shocking detail. Along with the rest of us, viruses were evidently doing their best to survive in this world too. It was downright terrifying. If this STD could speak, it’d probably say something like, “Die, normies!”
Once a man contracted the virus, his genitalia would swell up to an unusual size. Normally, that’d be something to celebrate, but after a few months, its color would worsen until, ultimately…it exploded. Like, literally exploded. After that, you couldn’t regrow it with modern medicine. Instead, the afflicted fella would need a magical elixir in order to regrow what he’d lost to the horrific disease. The most insidious thing about it was that women showed no symptoms, so they could transmit the disease without even realizing they were infected.
Basically, this disease was out there to destroy a man’s second brain—downright blew the thing up. It seriously explodes? I dunno if you’d even call that a disease. Seems more like a curse to me. This world’s got some pretty intense viruses, doesn’t it? I rapidly dropped my plans for fun. Even an evil lord isn’t so devious that he wants to see his little guy get blown up.
“Uh, Kurt, we’re going straight home today.”
“Yeah.”
Not even we were brave enough to go off and play after hearing about this STD.

Eila grinned. “You two should be grateful I warned you.”
“Yes, ma’am.”
We could have found ourselves in dire trouble if we hadn’t known. I had no choice but to express my honest gratitude to Eila.

Chapter 6:
Business

THE SEVENTH WEAPONS FACTORY had been built on a resource asteroid that had already been thoroughly mined. Their facility had expanded several times over the years via gathering and bonding multiple asteroids together. This veritable space fortress supported the Empire's military.

Engineering Captain Nias, a member of the Seventh's team, removed the helmet of her space suit and drifted down a gravity-free hallway. She turned back to a coworker drifting behind her and gave him an annoyed look.

"They can't cancel on us now!" she complained, close to tears.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" her coworker said, looking defeated. "The customer just suddenly said they'll be getting the fortress class from the Third instead. I'm sure the Third bribed them or showed them a good time."

Imperial weapons factories were numbered starting from one, so the Seventh Weapons Factory was seventh from the top.

"But how can they just back out now? We've followed all the specs they wanted and put so much work into the interior just like they asked us to! How can they just say they don't need it anymore? We've honored all their stupid requests!"

"Sure was hard work, wasn't it?"

"It was harder than hard! How much overtime did I put into this? How many days off did I sacrifice to finish the work? How many all-nighters?!"

"Yeah, we've all poured our blood, sweat, and tears into builds lately. I didn't go home for months, remember?"

Their recent ships had been top-notch in terms of required maintenance and functionality, and they'd even put extra effort into their outer and interior aesthetic designs—a rare move for the Seventh. As a result, their sales had improved.

When Nias and her colleague reached a large monitor, their feet sank down to the floor, pulled in by the spot of artificial gravity. On the screen was the fortress-class ship they were discussing. The enormous round structure was a mobile base—a fortress, just as its classification implied. It could house, resupply, and maintain a whole fleet. An incredibly extravagant asset overall, one uncommon even in the Imperial regular army.

For all its extravagance, the fortress was equally functional. Still, it was even more ridiculously huge than the superdreadnought Liam had ordered, so it was being constructed outside of the enormous weapons factory.

"It'll be a real problem if we can't sell this monstrosity. The maintenance alone will eat away at our funds."

Plenty of problems would come with failing to sell an insanely huge fortress class like this one. Just keeping it functional would cost them workers,

parts, and money. If they were forced to choose between maintaining it on their own and taking a huge loss just to get it off their hands, the Seventh would probably choose the latter. Both options spelled financial trouble.
Nias held her head in her hands. “That’s why I said not to take the order without an advance and a strict contract, but the higher-ups got so carried away!”
The Seventh Weapons Factory had been making steady sales lately, so they had eagerly accepted the request to build a fortress-class ship so they could boast of the achievement. At this rate, they’d just end up taking a loss when some rich noble or the regular army volunteered to take it off their hands. For a large discount too, of course.
“Our pay will probably drop for a while,” Nias’s coworker said with a bitter chuckle. “Even though we broke our backs to make this happen.”
The pay of those working in the weapons factories rose and fell depending on the fluctuation of sales.
But Nias had another concern beyond a reduction in pay. “At this rate, they’ll cancel *my* project because we won’t have the budget, and I can’t handle that!”
If they took a massive loss, it would affect their future plans, and Nias’s current priorities could be completely scrapped.
Her coworker gave her an exasperated look. “We’re not gonna sell it, though. There aren’t many nobles who could even afford a fortress class.”
Obviously, they couldn’t sell advanced military assets to foreign nations either. They could sell to nobles within the Empire, but only those who received official permission for their purchases.
For Nias, Liam Sera Banfield was the first potential customer who came to mind. “I’ll go make a sales call to House Banfield,” she said.
Her coworker snorted. “The count is in the middle of his noble training. Sorry, but you’re not gonna be able to chat with him.”
“Oh, that’s right…” When she heard this, Nias hugged her knees, muffled sobs leaking from her lips. With no gravity to hold her down, however, she floated in the air like a little ball of sadness.
Feeling sorry for Nias, her coworker decided to give her some advice. “Do you know anything about the count’s training? Did he tell you when it would be over or any of his plans? He likes you, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d discussed that with you.”
Nias had received special treatment from Liam ever since she’d been entrusted with the maintenance of his mobile knight, the Avid. For that reason, she tended to gain information about him that couldn’t easily be discovered otherwise. She actually had Liam’s location and his schedule on hand.
She rapidly tapped away at her tablet, checking her backlog of messages. “Ah, here it is. I’ve got the name of the domain he’s studying in and his whole agenda!”

“Shouldn’t you have checked for those earlier?” her coworker muttered. “What *does* the count see in you?”
Undeterred, Nias confirmed Liam’s situation. “He’s in his third year of school right now, and it’ll be over after this. Oh, and there’ll be a party at House Razel when his class is finished. If I can attend, I’ll be able to meet with him!”
When her coworker heard this, he checked his own tablet to see if House Razel had any deals going with the Seventh Weapons Factory. “House Razel… Ah, we have done business with them. Twenty years ago, we fixed up some of their equipment. We’ve only done maintenance for them, though. No purchases.”
“Hmm. I’d like to get them to buy something new from us.”
“I see that it’s been publicly announced that the count will be attending the party. If you don’t do a good job pushing the fortress class on Lord Liam, the Third might sweep in and cheat you again, Nias.”
Nias ground her teeth, already hearing Eulisia’s haughty laughter echoing in her ears. She absolutely despised the Third’s successful saleswoman.
“I’m not losing to Eulisia! I’m gonna make this sale!”

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After hearing about the whole…*exploding* thing, I devoted all my time to my training. No matter how much I wanted to mess around, staying home out of fear was the smart choice. Because of this, I ended up spending the remainder of my school year as a meek and diligent student. But evil lords were cunning; they didn’t rush headfirst into dangerous situations! That was what I told myself, at least.
During a break, I sat on a bench on the mansion’s grounds. This spot was like a park, and taking breaks there was a small comfort I enjoyed outside of my strict regimen.
“At last, it’s almost over.”
Sitting beside me, Kurt smiled and said, “It sure is. I’ve had a lot to think about these last few years. I’d say I enjoyed it overall.”
On his other side sat Eila, another new friend of mine, whose coveralls were unzipped down to her belly. By this point, she seemed to have abandoned any sense of modesty she might have had three years ago. Or maybe she just didn’t think of the us as members of the opposite sex. I did kind of wonder about the feverish looks I’d caught her sending Kurt’s way every so often, but I’d accepted the fact that I might never understand.
Eila said, “We were basically just forced to work, but I guess it was fun enough. It’s not an experience you’ll get anywhere else, so in that sense, I suppose it’s valuable.”
“I had no fun whatsoever,” I griped.

“Well, you couldn’t play around since you were afraid of the whole ‘blowing up’ thing.” Eila covered her mouth and snickered, so I flicked her on the forehead. “Ow!”
Being afraid of the STD, I had avoided chasing any skirts, but it bugged me that she’d pointed that out.
Dammit! This is all that stupid viscount’s fault! Aren’t you a failure of a ruler if you let a dangerous STD run rampant through your territory? I decided to have every single one of my subjects tested when I returned to my domain. I couldn’t tolerate being too scared to fool around.
I pressed my finger to Eila’s forehead and moved it around in a circle.
“S-stop that! Forgive me, Liam!” Eila apologized, but I was a villain, so I wouldn’t let her go that easily.
“I don’t think so. You’re getting off too lightly for teasing me. You should be thanking me instead.”
Eila blurted, “You pompous scaredy-cat!” I prodded her even harder.
Huh? Come to think of it, I sort of remember my coworker in my past life, Nitta, saying something similar…maybe. It’s been so long, I can barely remember.
While I was taunting Eila, Kurt said nervously, “Hey, the day before the big party, there’s going to be a special presentation, right? The martial arts exhibition or whatever?”
I looked over and studied him for a moment. From how he’d butted in like that, as if to distract me from messing with Eila, I wondered if their feelings were mutual. I decided to let her off easy this time and removed my finger from her forehead.
“Some exhibition that’ll be. It’s just a bunch of fixed matches.”
Once we finished our training, we were supposed to show off the fruits of our labor. People—mainly our relatives—would gather in House Razel’s domain to see how much we’d grown. The winners of our little tournament were chosen from the start, however; the Hot-Blooded Knight had already told us that we were supposed to let the viscount’s darlings win. Viscount Razel no doubt wanted them to leave here with nice memories.
Could the viscount actually be a bad person? At first I thought he was morally superior, but his territory’s falling apart, he’s let a violent STD infect his populace, and now he’s holding fixed sparring matches. Did I get him wrong after all?
Eila shrugged. “Well, what can ya do? Peter and Katerina are officially getting engaged this year too. Since Peter will be in the exhibition, they probably want to build up his reputation for that. Plus, the viscount’ll be happier to see his favorites win.”
Kurt was confused by Eila’s wording. “Wait, you make it sound like the viscount doesn’t already know they’ll win.”
“I wonder… I feel like this sort of thing is usually arranged by vassals who are trying to please their lord. It is possible the viscount has no idea.”

I thought about it. Was he just so purehearted, then, that he didn't suspect his vassals of rigging the event? Could he be that blindly trusting of his subordinates?

"It's not good to be virtuous," I said to myself.

"What was that, Liam?"

"Nothing." Kurt cocked his head at my muttering, but I changed the subject. "I've got full mastery in the Way of the Flash, so it hurts me to have to lose, you know?"

It would be embarrassing as all hell if a master martial artist lost in a student tournament. I'd been told to lose on purpose, but it didn't sit right with me. Kurt felt the same way, but his circumstances were slightly different.

"I agree with you, but I'm up against Peter, so I don't have to feel too bad. I asked to be matched against him, and they okayed it."

"Why'd you ask that?"

"Peter and I both utilize the Ahlen style, and Peter has full mastery, so I've got an excuse if I lose."

Kurt and Peter both used one of the Empire's major sword styles. During their match, they would make an impression no matter who won.

"Peter sure doesn't seem as strong as you. Is he really a master?"

I considered Kurt a formidable opponent, but I was confident I could kill Peter easily. I couldn't imagine my gut was wrong about his level of swordsmanship, so I was really curious.

Kurt lowered his voice. "I don't want to start a rumor, but I think Peter bought his mastery with money."

"Bought it?! Are you kidding me?" I blurted.

"You're so principled, Liam," Eila said teasingly. "It's not unheard of for schools to sell masterships to people with a high social status."

Can famous schools really get away with things like that? True, it's good publicity for people in high places to have mastery of their sword style, but it's hardly in the spirit of martial arts.

While I sat there in astonishment, Kurt smiled and said, "Well, my father and I obtained ours purely with skill. In his case, it was only after becoming lord, though. Even though we didn't buy our mastery, the mandatory exam cost us a hefty fee."

This whole system is rotten. Hearing all this made me appreciate how virtuous Master Yasushi was. He hadn't asked anything of me in return when he'd granted me full mastery, and I had nothing but gratitude for him. It was a pretty strange coincidence that I'd managed to meet up with him here. I figured it was the Guide's work, and that made me all the more thankful toward *him* too.

In any case, if I wanted to keep the Way of the Flash alive, then I really would need to find some students, as my master had urged me.

I had to say, I wasn't at all fond of the idea of Peter buying his mastery. Considering he was one of Viscount Razel's favorites, I'd expected him to be

the honorable type. Did he just not place much value on one's martial arts skills? If that was the case, he and I just weren't compatible.
As the three of us chatted, I spotted two other students out on a walk. Oddly enough, it was Peter and his fiancée, Katerina. They were strolling through the courtyard with their arms linked, looking for all the world like an intimate couple.
When he noticed us sitting on the bench, Peter smirked and walked right up to us. "Well, *hello*, pauper nobles." His drawling voice really grated on the ears.
"Oh, Peter, don't say things like that. Don't you feel sorry for them?" As she said this, Katerina snickered. Their rotten personalities were on full display. To be fair, I must've come across as a sorry case compared to more established nobles. I couldn't make any excuses for myself when I was still paying off the huge debt my parents had left me with. Amagi had sternly reminded me to never boast that I was rich. It bothered me to keep quiet about the riches I gained from the alchemy box, but I didn't want to break my promise to her, so I kept my lips zipped.
Eila asked flatly, "What can we do for you?"
Peter looked down his nose at us, the personification of a spoiled noble child riding his parents' coattails. He didn't come across at all like the upstanding person his reputation made him out to be.
"Actually, I thought I'd do something for you poor people. I'd like to invite you to come around my *favorite* casino."
He wants to hang out with us? I liked the idea of going to the casino, but I didn't really want to be seen gambling in the territory of a virtuous lord like the viscount, who made light of the importance of entertainment. Besides, I was more interested in the profit that could be made than enjoying the games themselves. But the way gambling worked, the house almost always won and the gamblers were meant to lose, so the potential for profit was dubious.
"Not interested."
Eila tried to soften my words, a phony smile on her face. "Oh, um, I don't think it's for us. Y-you know, since we don't have the money to play and all."
Kurt also wanted no part of it, but I could tell he felt the need to be polite because of the couple's standing. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline as well."
Peter's face twisted with irritation. "Wow, you're turning down an invitation from *me*? I possess full mastery of the Ahlen sword style, I'll have you know. You don't want to make me angry, dooo you?"
From his belt, he drew not a toy-like shock sword, but an actual laser blade. Eila backed up in surprise, and Kurt darted in front of her protectively.
"Put your weapon away, please."
Even Katerina seemed to realize this situation was taking a bad turn, and she also tried to talk him down. "Don't, Peter. You can't start a fight on the mansion grounds!"

Peter swung the blade around him, tracing it through the air, but he looked like a total amateur. He stepped forward, ignoring his fiancée's warning.
"Seems like you could use some punishment!"
"I told you to stop!" Kurt snapped, but someone else moved first.
"Bwagh?!"
Right when Peter stepped forward to intimidate us, Katerina grabbed his arm and yanked him backward, causing him to tumble to the ground. He smacked the back of his head and rolled around in pain. It was so hilarious, I had to point at him and laugh.
"Hey, look! A master swordsman tripped and bumped his head, and now he's writhing around on the ground! Just incredible!" While I cackled, Katerina helped Peter back to his feet.
"Peter, are you okay? I'll call a doctor right away."
"I-It hurts. It hurts! D-dammit… I won't let you three get away with this!"
The sight of him limping away on Katerina's shoulder was so pitiful, I couldn't even laugh anymore.

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From the roof of the mansion, the Guide had watched Liam and Peter's encounter.
"Why is that boy thanking me again?"
The Guide held his throbbing chest, suffering from this fresh wave of gratitude. He didn't understand what had set it off. He was doing everything he could to enact his revenge, but nothing had proved effective. He'd planned to relish Liam's misery after the boy's poor treatment from House Razel, but not only was Liam not upset, he also seemed to be at peace—even enjoying himself!
The Guide covered his face with his hands. "Even after all this time, I'm still unable to bring him down. Is this just the way things are? Am I just going to remain powerless, unable to take my revenge?"
With his abilities compromised by this tormenting gratitude, the Guide couldn't do anything major, yet he still felt the burning need to bring Liam down. He couldn't simply let the boy go. To the Guide, Liam was an enemy he had no choice but to defeat.
"Even the pirates who plan on going after him are smaller and weaker than Goaz and his crew. I can't rely on them to best him."
At this time, there were pirates setting a trap for Liam, but he couldn't imagine they'd be successful. If he thought they might actually have a chance, the Guide wouldn't have been in such agony.
"It's not enough, but what can I do? Is there nothing I can do but watch him helplessly?"
The Guide fell to his knees in pain. A sentient light observed him from a distance. This light then looked down on the laughing Liam and wiggled excitedly.

***

Meanwhile, the highest-ranking members of the pirate gang who'd sworn vengeance against Liam had gathered in a meeting room. They sat around a table, glasses of booze in front of them, and their leader chewed on a cigar. The group was furious that Liam hadn't shown up at the casino yet.

"How long are we gonna drag this out? It's just one kid!" The boss slammed his fist on the table, spooking his underlings.

Ever since they looked into him, they had been preparing, but the boy hadn't left House Razel's estate even once, so the pirates couldn't lay a hand on him.

"At this rate, it'll all be over before we can do anything to him, Boss. According to our info, Liam's time here is almost up. If he goes back home, he'll be out of our reach."

Liam's domain wasn't a place they could access easily. If they left their turf to go after him, they might run into Liam's military, or even other pirate gangs. In other words, the kid was untouchable the moment he left the area.

The gang's leader couldn't let Liam's insolence go unpunished. Contemplating their next move, he finally brought up Viscount Razel's name.

"Contact Randolph. This is exactly the kind of thing he should be helping us with."

His men exchanged nervous looks.

"Is that a good idea? Didn't the viscount warn us not to contact him too much?"

"This is important. If people see us getting disrespected, it's all over for us. Some other pirate gang will march over here and start throwing their weight around, and I can't imagine that bastard Randolph would want that either."

One of the pirates said that he'd contact the viscount, and a few moments later, a holographic window manifested before their boss, displaying the unhappy face of Viscount Razel.

"I believe I told you not to contact me unless absolutely necessary."

Dropping his raging demeanor from a few moments ago, the boss took a polite tone with the viscount.

"Sorry, Lord Razel, but we'd like to request your help with something."

And so the pirate boss made his proposal to Viscount Razel.

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"What do you say? It's not such a bad deal, is it?"

Viscount Razel's brow furrowed as he conversed with the boss of the pirate gang.

“You want to harm one of the noble children in my care? Of course I can’t allow that.”
If serious harm came to any one of them, he would lose noble parents’ trust, and his reputation would take a huge hit.
“And what about our reputation, Lord Razel? In order to prevent other pirates from making moves on our turf, we need to beat down any idiots who pick fights with us. If we don’t, we won’t be respected.”
If one didn’t have the respect of others, they had nothing. That thought process also applied to noble society. If other nobles saw you as ineffectual, they considered you lower than themselves. Viscount Razel understood this and decided to lend the man an ear.
“You do realize you’re only alive thanks to my benevolence.”
“We understand that, and we’re grateful for it, but I believe we can take care of this little problem without harming your reputation.”
The viscount considered this, stroking his chin. I suppose House Banfield has less value to me than what I would lose if I angered these fools.
To the viscount, House Banfield was a terribly disrespectful family that had haughtily brought a fleet of 3,000 vessels with them when they dropped off their child. Their territory was in shambles, and their debt was vast. There was absolutely no value in pursuing a relationship with the Banfields. Weighing the matter this way, the viscount decided it was more beneficial to prioritize his relationship with the pirates.
“What’s this idea of yours?”
“We’ll attack them when they leave your territory on their journey home. House Banfield’s military has no real strength, right?”
“I can’t assist you…but I might be a bit ‘late’ in responding to any calls for help.”
They settled for that arrangement. House Razel wouldn’t assist the pirates in their attack, but the viscount would also ignore any calls for assistance from House Banfield. The pirate boss smirked, pleased with their deal.
“That’s perfect! There’s just one person we’d like to add to the equation. He said he’ll help us out.”
“Who’s that?”
“Lord Peter of House Petack.”
“Peter?”
“He’s willing to assist us. I guess the kid has a personal grudge against the Banfield kid too. He’ll be sending House Petack’s fleet to aid us.”
Viscount Razel’s head started to throb when he heard this. *Katerina told me the same. Peter’s really got that bad of a grudge against this kid?* Katerina had said the two of them had almost gotten into a fight, but he couldn’t understand such a thing leading to the mobilization of an entire army.
Peter’s an incompetent fool, but I wouldn’t want to upset him and have the engagement called off.

Because the Guide had swapped House Banfield's reputation for House Petack's, Viscount Razel was so desperate to maintain his good relationship with House Petack that he was willing to take some unscrupulous risks.
"I approve of your plan, but I can't approve of the involvement of House Petack's fleet. The attacking ships will be pirate vessels only. Is that clear?"
In not so many words, the viscount was saying House Petack's ships were to masquerade as pirate vessels. The boss understood his meaning and agreed.
"Yes, my lord."
The viscount thought back to the Banfield fleet that had come on the first day. Those 3,000 ships were quite the brazen display, but as I recall, they were all outdated models. They'd most likely lose even against the pirates alone.
If the heir of such a lowly house was lost in a pirate attack, he couldn't imagine the Empire would spend the resources to do a proper investigation. If he simply performed his due diligence and sent the Empire an account of the events, it would all be swept under the rug.
"Still, don't leave any evidence, you hear me?"
"Of course. Thank you, Lord Viscount… I'm looking forward to our continued relations."
Their communication came to an end, and Viscount Razel returned to his work. Currently, he was reviewing the list of attendees for the end-of-year party. He smiled, satisfied. It would be a more impressive turnout than usual this year.
"It's all thanks to House Petack. We'll have to make the party even more lavish."
Viscount Razel considered all the possibilities a relationship with House Petack would afford him. Through their connections, he'd be able to establish further relationships with merchants, weapons factories, and others.
"I'm looking forward to this."
As the noble dreamed of his future, who else had graced the viscount's office sight unseen but the Guide, lured in by the man's devious intentions.
"Oh, my, this certainly is an interesting turn of events." Having listened to Viscount Razel's conversation with the leader of the pirates, the Guide was delighted that things were moving in the worst possible direction for Liam. The boy was unknowingly hurtling toward his doom, and the Guide hadn't even lifted a finger.
"Pirates, House Petack, and House Razel—they've all joined forces to take Liam down. How fantastic!"
If the three worked together, surely they would squash Liam.
"Wonderful! I love it! At most, they'll bring a couple hundred ships to pick Liam up. If they surround his escort with thousands upon thousands of ships, even Liam won't stand a chance—hee hee hee hee!"

Unlike Viscount Razel, the Guide had an accurate understanding of the sort of fleet House Banfield would be sending. Contrary to the viscount's expectations, it would be a modest number of ships, as was customary, though they would be an elite force. On the other hand, the pirates' and House Petack's ships would number in the tens of thousands. No matter how formidable Liam's personal military was, in the face of such odds, there would be nothing he could do to emerge victorious against them.

"It'll be a nice, torturous death for you, Liam."

Up until now, he'd only been observing matters while conserving his energy, but the Guide finally decided to utilize his power. Space warped in front of him. He stuck his hand into the distortion and began to manipulate what he could.

"This time…this time for sure, I'll finally make Liam miserable!"

The Guide couldn't manage much more than playing pranks at the time, but he used every remaining bit of his power in order to corner Liam as much as possible.

"Ha ha ha, oh, Liam! Just you wait… Your demise is coming for you!"

The stealthy white light that always dogged the Guide's heels finally left his side to take action.

Chapter 7:
Full Mastery

"MANY IMPORTANT GUESTS will be attending this party," the Hot-Blooded Knight said. "Put your all into the preparations!"

That day, we were in the event hall where the party would take place, setting up for it. The favored students didn't have to get their hands dirty, of course. Enduring such a difference in our treatment right up until the very end ticked me off, but the work was easy enough.

"They're really going all out, aren't they?" I muttered.

"Rumor has it that a bunch of people from House Petack will be there," Kurt said from beside me. "They're going to officially announce the engagement between House Razel and House Petack too, so I'm sure they want this to be as grand as possible."

"And that's why *we're* doing all this work, huh?" I said bitterly. The grand announcement had nothing to do with us.

Setting up the party involved some honest-to-goodness construction work; we were tearing up part of the floor of the venue and installing a fountain. Machines did most of the work, but the process took time due to the sheer size of the place. Thankfully, professional laborers were in charge, and we were just assisting them.

How many people are gonna come to this stupid party anyway?

As we worked, the fighting ring for our martial arts matches was brought in.

"We're gonna fight in *that*?"

"Did you end up deciding not to take part, Liam?"

"It'd be too humiliating for a master of the Way of the Flash to lose. Even if the matches are fixed, I have no obligation to play the loser for them."

I wouldn't be able to face Master if I participated in a fixed match. Kurt, however, planned to participate and lose at a suitable moment.

He laughed, though it came off a little sad. "Our time here's almost at its end, huh?"

Even leaving a place like this made us feel kind of forlorn.

"Don't get so down. When this is all over, we'll be going straight to the next stage of our learning. We'll only get busier from here on out."

"Yeah, you're right." He still seemed a little sad.

The Hot-Blooded Knight approached us. "Your family called, Kurt. It's urgent, so head over to the communications room immediately."

"Something urgent…? Okay, got it."

As Kurt briskly left the hall, the Hot-Blooded Knight returned to his duties.

"Well, guess I should get back to work too," I said.

When I turned to resume my labor, I spotted an animal out of the corner of my eye. Well, part of an animal—a dog's tail.

“Did it wander in here? Something weird like this happened to me once before…”
Since I’d had one in my past life, I was really fond of dogs. I would feel bad for the thing if it got caught up in one of the construction machines and was injured. I left my post and chased after the dog to let it outside of the great hall, but it took off. It kept turning corners, and I would only catch glimpses of its tail over and over.
“Wait, where’d it go?”
When I finally lost sight of the dog, I found myself near the communications room. Inside, I heard Kurt’s voice.
“So you can’t come pick me up because you’re busy dealing with pirates? All right, I got it. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”
He appeared to be speaking with a relative from home. I leaned in closer and overheard that pirates had invaded his territory, so his family wouldn’t be able to come get him from House Razel anytime soon.
Kurt finished his conversation and left the room. He was surprised to find me waiting by the doorway. “Were you listening?”
“Sorry. I chased a dog all the way over here.”
Kurt looked uneasy. “Oh, yeah? Well, seems there’s trouble at home. Guess I’m not gonna be going back there for a while.”
“Did something happen?”
“They’ve uncovered a pirate gang—a really large-scale operation too. My father’s racking his brain trying to deal with it. He said they’re using a resource asteroid for their base of operations and it’ll be tough to take them down.”
So pirates were attacking Baron Exner’s domain, huh? That gave me a brilliant idea: I’d deal with the pirates for them, and the Exners would be indebted to me.
“Kurt, call your father. Tell him I’ll bring you home…and that I want to take part in this pirate hunt too.”
“I appreciate the offer, but I can’t accept that. There are just too many of them. Anyway, we already owe you. We can’t just keep relying on your help.”
Son of an evil lord though he was, Kurt still planned to honor the debt he owed me. Very admirable! But I just wanted a good reason to hunt some pirates.
“Kurt, I’m gonna let you in on something. Defeating pirates can fill your wallet.”
“Huh?”
“We’ll split the profits seventy-thirty. What do you say?”
I was trying to negotiate for the spoils, but Kurt was having a hard time keeping up.
“W-wait, you can’t just decide that! Isn’t this something you have to discuss with your vassals back home?”

“Nah. My territory belongs to me and me alone. My orders are absolute. If I say black is white, then white it shall be. My people can’t refuse when I order them to fight.”
Being a noble is great! War is the most foolish thing there is, but I can start one on a whim if I so desire.
Kurt was staring at me, slack-jawed.
You’re so naïve, Kurt. Still, I should contact Amagi about this.
“Pirate hunting is fun. You’ll see.”
I tapped a fist against my stunned friend’s chest.

***

Someone had been listening in on Kurt and Liam’s conversation.
“Hmm, seems I’ve heard something I shouldn’t have.”
The person watching the pair from the shadows grinned upon learning of their future plans. She’d been keeping an eye on Kurt and Liam throughout their entire training.
“Soon enough, they’ll…”
Sensing someone approaching, the eavesdropper quickly wiped the cunning expression off her face.

***

I felt a super unsettling aura emanating from nearby, but when I looked for the source, I only saw Eila coming our way.
“Is this where you were? You’re gonna get in trouble if you don’t get back to work soon.”
I guess she came to find us.
I asked, “You didn’t see someone suspicious just now, did you?”
Eila tilted her head to the side, looking bewildered. “Suspicious? Nope. I don’t think anyone suspicious would be able to get in here.”
Security was tight in a noble’s mansion. If anyone with questionable intentions could get inside, they would have to be a pro among pros.
Worry creased her brow. “What’s up? Did *you* see someone suspicious?”
“No, I just thought I felt something. Oh, did you see a dog?”
“Definitely not.” Eila looked downright mystified now.
Kurt looked pensive for a moment. “You know, come to think of it, I sometimes feel like someone’s watching me. If you’re feeling it too, maybe it isn’t just my imagination.”
Eila wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. “What? You’re not talking about ghosts, are you? S-stop that. I can’t do scary stuff.”
Wow, she can be really cute sometimes, huh? Kurt didn’t elaborate on his comment, as if afraid of making Eila more nervous. This guy’s too nice to girls. Does he have a thing for Eila, after all?
“Sorry about that. Should we go back, Liam?” Kurt suggested.

The three of us left the communication room behind. As we walked down the hallway, the Hot-Blooded Knight came around the corner looking for us. “Hey! What are the three of you up to? C’mon, back to work.”

***

We finished preparing the party venue, and our training had nearly come to an end. There was less than a month now until the students would return to their own territories, and they were all relieved about that. I felt the same way, but I also dreaded the mountain of work that would undoubtedly be waiting for me.
“I’ll be busy for a while, I’m sure.” I sighed.
As I was cleaning up my room, Eila poked her head in. “You in here, Liam?”
“I am.”
“Oh, good. Um, Kurt told me that you two are gonna stop by House Exner on your way home, right?”
Kurt must have shared our plans with her, so now she knew that Kurt and I would be going pirate hunting for House Exner.
“We are.”
“Do you…mind if I come along too?”
“You?”
“Y-yeah. Some stuff happened, so…”
Eila didn’t seem to want to reveal her reasons, but I was pretty sure by now that she had a thing for Kurt. She must not have wanted to be parted from him so soon, so she figured she’d follow him into his domain.
“I don’t mind, but if Kurt says no, then you can just come to my place.”
“Huh? Oh, right. Y-yeah.”
From how flustered she’d become, maybe Eila hadn’t considered that Kurt might say no. If it bothered him to have her at his home world, I’d just take see her home myself.
While I’m doing that, I can meet Baron Berman and Eila’s family. Since she’s getting the cold shoulder from House Razel, I’m sure her family are evil nobles like me.
“I’ll talk to Kurt about it, then. Come to my ship when we leave. I bet you’ll be surprised.”
I’d gotten word from Amagi. *It* was finally ready.
“Ah ha ha… Thanks, Liam.” Eila scratched her head, laughing bashfully.
Well, they’re both friends of mine, so I’ll cheer on their little romance. I should help out with whatever I can since we’re all evil lord buddies.

***

Kurt had many things to think about as his three years of schooling came to an end. Presently, he was out on the mansion grounds, wishing to be alone with his thoughts.

“I didn’t know how this would turn out when it started, but now that it’s ending, I’m actually gonna miss it.”
When he’d first been entrusted to House Razel, he’d been thoroughly disappointed. But now, he was gratified by the experience, and it was all because of his roommate, Liam.
Liam’s been a noble since he was born. He has a different sort of resolve than I do.
Kurt had done his best not to shame himself as a self-made noble, but when he learned about the lives of nobles like Liam, he had to admit his weaknesses. Even his swordplay, which he was proud of, couldn’t compare to Liam’s, and he had nowhere near Liam’s confidence.
Unlike Kurt, Liam was already a ruling count at his age. He didn’t seem to have the best reputation, but he was impressive enough to Kurt. At times, he tried to come across as a villain, but it was amply clear from how he lived his life that he was hardworking. Even if he did have something of a crude mouth and a twisted personality, he was a good person in Kurt’s eyes.
All the things Liam’s taught me have really helped. He even gave my family his support, so I want to pay him back somehow.
Thanks to Liam, House Exner’s financial situation was steadily improving. He felt indebted to his friend for that, but Kurt currently had nothing with which to repay Liam.
You never know; we might not stay in touch after our schooling ends. I’ve got to do something for him before then.
Their meeting here had been something of a miracle, and due to the distance between their domains and their increasing responsibilities, there was a good chance they wouldn’t maintain their bond after parting. They’d probably meet again at school, but that would be a big place, and they’d be tremendously busy. This might be the only chance they’d ever have to share a close relationship.
While Kurt was contemplating all this, someone called his name.
“There you are, Kurt!”
“Huh? Liam?” He turned around and found Liam standing before him. The boy sat down beside Kurt and stated his purpose.
“We’ll be going to your place when this is done, right? Sounds like Eila wants to come along with us. Do you mind if she takes advantage of your hospitality for a bit?”
Upon hearing Eila’s name, Kurt grew restless. “Eila? Sure, but I don’t know if we’ll be able to entertain her properly at my place. I don’t know much about etiquette and such.”
Self-made noble families often had trouble following Imperial etiquette. Kurt was worried about offending Eila with his family’s ignorance.
“I don’t think you need to worry about that. If you really don’t want to, though, I can take her to my place instead.”
“That might be better.”
Just like that, the matter with Eila was settled.

***

At House Banfield's mansion, Brian opened a line of communication with the Imperial Home Planet, calling a friend of his—a woman named Serena with a wrinkled face and long white hair. Since she looked to be in her golden years even with the help of anti-aging technology, she was actually far older than that.

"It's been a long time, Serena." Brian greeted the woman politely, but her response was curt.

"You've gotten old since I last saw you, Brian. It's rare for you to call me. Has something happened?"

"I see you haven't changed. I still picture you working in the Imperial palace as a maid."

"What year do you think it is? The great-grandkid took over that job a long time ago. I'm living the retired life now."

"I have to admit I'm envious."

"You should've given up on that rotten family and come join me."

"I have pledged to serve House Banfield for life."

"Oh, yeah?"

Serena had once served as the head maid at the Imperial palace, so she'd heard her fair share of dirty details, and she still had connections there. Brian had actually been scouted by the palace himself at one time.

"Anyway, how have you been, Brian? Rumor has it you've got the first wise ruler since Lord Alistair over there."

Brian decided to endure his shame and confide in Serena about House Razel. "Yes, I'm actually calling about Lord Liam. He's training with another lord right now, but I just cannot accept the treatment he's been receiving there. I was wondering if there was anything you could tell me about this fellow."

The butler had done a little digging on his own, but for whatever reason, he hadn't been able to come up with much of anything. Thus, he'd decided to rely on the ace up his sleeve, Serena. Truth be told, he hadn't wanted to make this call, but it was a sacrifice out of his concern for Liam.

"Which lord would that be?"

"Viscount Razel. He had a good reputation and seemed to like Lord Liam at first." The moment he named House Razel, Serena sighed. Alarmed, he went on, "Wh-what is it?"

"House Razel's got a good reputation…among other nobles, anyway. From the Empire's point of view, the viscount's got a lot of issues. Seems like you left him with a real problem house."

"What?"

"Just pray your little golden boy doesn't pick up any twisted values."

"Wh-wh-what do you mean by that?"

Serena sighed again. “You should have called me sooner. I could have referred you to a less problematic house.”
Brian was stunned into silence. Her reaction confirmed that things weren’t good.

***

Tomorrow, my days at House Razel would be over. Today, we were taking part in the martial arts exhibition, the part of the festivities where the students’ skills would be shown off to their family members. However, only the families of the favored students had been invited to spectate—allegedly, there just wasn’t enough space for everyone. This way, House Razel could put on a whole series of fixed matches.
Presently, the match between Kurt and Peter was ongoing. After they clashed a number of times, Kurt grunted in exasperation.
I heard Peter respond, “Hm? What’s the matter? Since we’re both users of the Ahlen style, I can’t have you acting so gutless.”
Peter was dominating the match, and Kurt was…struggling. The reason for this was completely clear to me: Kurt was having a hard time with how bad of a swordsman Peter was. The difference between their skill levels was so great, Kurt couldn’t even find a way to lose. This must have been incredibly embarrassing for my friend. After all, they were supposed to be using the same style, making the same types of moves, and taking the same kind of stances, but anyone watching could tell that Peter’s form was just plain poor.
“This is awful. I feel so bad for Kurt now.”
Eila, who was sitting next to me, said, “Whoever granted Peter mastery should probably have thought a little harder about it. He’s going to bring down the reputation of the whole Ahlen school.”
Kurt must have given up on losing gracefully. He simply threw his sword down and took a knee. “I yield.”
The mood in the hall grew a little awkward when Kurt forfeited, but a slow clap transformed into applause, and the atmosphere of celebration was restored.
Peter raised both hands. “Yes, yes, thank you!” Carried away by the excitement of the crowd, he said to Kurt, “I’m *very* disappointed in you, though.”
Eila frowned, her face etched with frustration.
However, Peter was on a roll. “Do you understand my abilities now?”
“I understand perfectly.” Kurt looked mature and admirable as he endured Peter’s provocations. If it were me, the second he insulted me, I’d have split him in two.
Suddenly, Peter pointed the tip of his shock sword directly at me. “Since my opponent was so boring, I’ll fight *you* next. Why don’t you climb up into the ring, mister poor person with an obscure sword style?”

At Peter’s words, a great cheer rippled through the venue at the promise of unscheduled entertainment. Up in the box seats, the viscount looked exasperated, but he nevertheless motioned for me to enter the ring.
My instructor, the Hot-Blooded Knight, came over to me with an apologetic look on his face. “Sorry, but you really should fight in a match.”
“He’s got some nerve calling my style obscure. Say, old man…I can fight seriously, right?”
The Hot-Blooded Knight started to say something, then merely smiled instead. “You’d do it even if I tried to stop you, wouldn’t you? I’ve never cared for this farce myself. Give ’em a good show, I say!” He grew serious as he added, “But no matter what you do, don’t kill him.”
Obviously I didn’t intend to kill him. “Just leave it to me. I never got a chance to practice holding back in a bout, but I did come up with a countermeasure for Kurt.”
“A countermeasure, you say?” The Hot-Blooded Knight didn’t understand what I meant.
From my pocket, I pulled out a toy that I intended to use as my weapon. Since even a shock sword was a lethal implement in my hands, I’d gone out of my way to procure a toy hammer—the kind that squished in with a squeaky sound when you hit something with it. If I smacked Peter with this, it shouldn’t hurt too bad.
“H-hey, that’s gonna be a little too disrespectful, don’t you think?”
“Well, if I use anything else, I’ll kill him. This is the best I can do.”
When I stepped up into the ring with the toy hammer, Peter pointed his finger at it and guffawed incredulously.
“You really want to fight *me* with a weapon like *that*?”
Viscount Razel’s brow had furrowed deeply. Evidently, he disapproved of my choice of weapon.
Meanwhile, Peter was egging me on. “Pfft… Ha ha! Looks like you’re so poor, you couldn’t even afford a sword. Want me to buy you a shock sword for the match?”
Ignoring his jeers, I waited for the signal to start the match. The referee glanced uncertainly at Viscount Razel, but the viscount nodded, and the match was approved.
“B-begin!”
It only took a second.
When the hammer connected with the top of Peter’s head, it made less of a “squeak!” and more of a tremendous “boom!” that echoed through the venue. As soon as the match started, I’d instantly closed the distance between us and swung the hammer down. No more, no less. Peter collapsed to the stage floor, eyes rolled back in his head.
“Huh, guess he was all talk.”
I swung the hammer in the air to discern whether it was broken, but it was still intact. These futuristic toys were really durable.

As I stood there in the ring, several of the viscount's darlings raised their voices in protest. They must have resented me for bursting their bubble and shoving reality in their faces.
"H-hey, that wasn't fair!"
I snorted and gestured for the whiner to enter the ring. "If you've got a problem, then why don't you get over here?"
I'll teach you spoiled prissy brats the harsh reality of the world. Might makes right, not the other way around! Before you guys go on to become holier-than-thou lords and ladies, let me show you what life's really about!
"Why waste time fighting you one on one? Get over here—I'll take you all on at once."
Stepping into the ring, one kid yelled, "Don't be so full of yourself! Nobody's even heard of your obscure sword sty—bghk!"
I sent him flying back out again with one swipe of the toy hammer.
"It's not obscure—it's the Way of the Flash. I'll carve it into your body along with the memory of your loss so that you'll never forget it again. Come on, come at me!"

Feeling too confident from their bogus victories, more kids scrambled into the ring and crowded around me, but I knocked them all flying with my squeaky hammer, cackling the whole time.

Having vanquished every last one of my challengers, I stood at the center of the ring and fed the truth to the befuddled crowd. “Don’t get cocky just because you won some fixed matches, small fry!”

That pissed off not just the assembled family members, but Viscount Razel as well. He was red-faced with rage. It might’ve been a step too far, but I doubted I’d ever have to deal with House Razel again after this, so I figured I might as well let out all my pent-up frustration at once.

Chapter 8
Too Late

THE NEXT DAY, Viscount Razel stood in the party hall, reviewing some of the celebration details. An enraged Hot-Blooded Knight strode up to him.
“What is the meaning of this, Lord Randolph? You will bring shame to House Razel if you ban one of your students from the celebration!”
Viscount Razel let out a sigh. Several of his other subordinates stood nearby, along with a bandaged Peter. Having become officially betrothed to Katerina, Peter was already being treated as a member of the family.
“Shame?” Peter said. “Why don’t you tell him what’s what, Viscount?”
Viscount Razel said to the stubborn knight, “Do you think it’s acceptable for students to wreak havoc for the house that kindly took them in? That fool of a boy has no right to enjoy our grand event. I’m not ruining my daughter’s engagement with another vulgar outburst from some whelp.”
Peter followed suit and expressed his own complaints. “Yeah, such a poor person shouldn’t be at an important party like this, anyway.”
They continued rattling off reasons why Liam should be excluded, but the simple truth of the matter was that they couldn’t allow someone who had shamed them so badly to attend. Viscount Razel’s first priority was his future with House Petack.
“Throw the Banfield boy out as soon as the party is done!” the viscount snarled. “I don’t ever want to see his face again. We’ll have no more to do with that house.”
When the party ended, so too did the nobles’ training, and they could return home. Some of them couldn’t leave immediately, so it was customary for their host to put them up for a few more days, but Viscount Razel and Peter were so incensed with Liam that they wouldn’t tolerate that.
The Hot-Blooded Knight clenched his fists in frustration.
Meanwhile, Peter had started finding fault with the venue decorations.
“Anyway, Viscount, what’s with this gloomy-looking plant over here?”
Viscount Razel wasn’t quite sure how to respond. After all, he thought the plant—a bonsai—had been a gift from House Petack.
“Well, it was a gift from your family. I figured I should display it for the occasion.”
This caught Peter off guard. “Huh? That’s not possible; I wouldn’t dare gift something so *ugly*. I wouldn’t want you to think I had bad taste.”
Viscount Razel brought a palm to his face, embarrassed. “There must have been some sort of mix-up, then. If it wasn’t a gift from House Petack, I’ll just get rid of it. You there, throw this out.”
It was left to the Hot-Blooded Knight to take care of the bonsai.

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“You went too far, Liam,” the Hot-Blooded Knight told me.
“And this is what I get for it? Viscount Razel sure is petty.”
“Come on, you know I serve the man. I don’t entirely blame you for thinking so, though.”
Before the grand celebration started, I’d been escorted to a spot far from the venue hall. It was a special venue prepared just for me, with a lunch box and a drink laid out on a table. At the conclusion of my training period, I was being given my own little personal send-off in the courtyard where I’d spent much of my free time. Next to me sat the only other person: the Hot-Blooded Knight, who for some reason was holding Brian’s bonsai, his shoulders slumped.
“I’m sorry about this. I raised my objections with Lord Randolph, but I couldn’t get him to listen.”
“The sad story of a knight not valued by his lord, eh? If you came to work for me, I’d welcome you with open arms.”
At my offer to recruit him, the Hot-Blooded Knight just threw back his head and laughed loudly; he must have thought my invitation was a joke. I was actually being serious, so his reaction made me a little sad.
“You’re funny, but I’ll be staying here, I’m afraid. I owe Lord Randolph, after all.”
“Huh, you surprise me. Well, maybe not.”
Nice guys like him often pledged their loyalty out of a sense of duty, and Viscount Razel was one of the more scrupulous nobles…or so I’d thought. I’d begun doubting that, to be honest, but it was still obvious that the viscount and I were too different to ever get along.
“So I’m to have a lonely lunch here all by myself, huh?”
“Sorry. Actually, the food and drink came out of my own pocket. I just felt too bad for you.”
Well, he is the instructor who’s taken care of me all this time, so I understand his sympathy. Anyway, all I came to House Razel for was the training, so I’m not gonna raise a fuss about the viscount’s stupid insult.
“Wow, I’m *so* happy,” I said sarcastically.
“You sure don’t look it. Your orders are to get outta here after you eat this. You really drew the short straw here, didn’t you?”
There was no point in complaining to the Hot-Blooded Knight. I pitied his predicament too.
“My ride’s already here waiting, so that won’t be a problem. What are you going to do with that, though?”
I was curious as to why he was carrying around Brian’s bonsai. The Hot-Blooded Knight looked perplexed.
“Well, I don’t really know, but it seems to me like it’s worth something. Lord Randolph told me to get rid of it… Guess I’ve been reluctant.”
“Oh, yeah? Well, could I have it as a memento, then?”

“Sure, I don’t mind. That helps me out, actually.” The Hot-Blooded Knight handed me the bonsai, then stood up. “Well…you take care.” With that, he took his leave.
I held up Brian’s bonsai and studied it. “You can’t tell what it’s worth, eh? That’s for sure.”
I felt anger seething in my gut. I was overcome by the desire to cause some chaos, but I was quickly distracted from this impulse when Kurt and Eila showed up in the courtyard. The two of them looked ready to depart, not at all dressed for a formal gathering.
“There you are, Liam.”
“We were looking for you.”
I set the bonsai down and asked the two of them what they were doing here, considering the party hadn’t even started yet. It was strange that they already appeared dressed to leave. “What’s up, you two?”
Kurt scratched his cheek, looking rather bashful. “Well, we heard you got kicked out and figured we probably wouldn’t be all that welcome either, so we decided not to attend.”
“If our ride’s here, why don’t we just head to the spaceport?” Eila suggested.
So both of them intended to leave the mansion with me rather than attend the celebration? Our strong bond as evil lords hummed in my heart.
“Sure, let’s go.”

***

While Liam and friends were leaving the mansion and heading for the spaceport…
The attendees had entered the party venue and were beginning to make merry. Thomas Henfrey, who’d been invited, greeted people while he searched for Liam. He figured the boy must be somewhere in the venue, but the merchant was having a hard time finding him.
“I don’t see Lord Liam anywhere.”
Just when he considered contacting her, Nias of the Seventh Weapons Factory popped up in front of him in her military uniform. “Oh, Mr. Henfrey! Did you find Lord Liam? I’ve been looking for him everywhere, but I haven’t seen him!” Nias had looked high and low too, but she’d had no luck.
“No, I can’t find him. Maybe he hasn’t shown up yet?”
Nias seemed on edge about something. “I don’t know; he’s not really the type to be late. Is there some reason he couldn’t come, do you think? This isn’t good… I was hoping we’d be talking business by now.”
“Huh? You wanted to talk business *here*? During their send-off party?” Thomas couldn’t believe that Nias was eager to sell him something before he’d even left House Razel’s domain.
Nias averted her gaze and laughed awkwardly. “Oh, well, you know, I just —”

A familiar voice said, “You’re just looking for a place to unload a fortress-class ship you couldn’t sell… Is that right?”
“E-Eulisia…”
Their conversation had been interrupted by none other than Eulisia, who had stepped up to them in an elegant dress. She was attending the party as a representative of the Third Weapons Factory.
“I’ve heard the rumors, you know. You’ve got a fortress class on your hands with no home. You came all the way here because the only thing you can do is get Lord Liam to buy it, correct?” Eulisia was smiling, but each of her words directed at Nias was a thorn.
“O-oh, like you’re not here for business! And what is that you’re wearing?”
“I’m just dressed to celebrate the end of the count’s training.”
“You always immediately stoop to seduction! I know you’re hoping to sell him something too!” Nias’s tone was desperate, but Eulisia maintained her composure.
“I would never try to get him to sign a contract on a day like today. Actually, Liam’s family is going to pick him up today in the superdreadnought we constructed for him. We delivered some other new models as well. I’m here today to thank him for his purchases. Of course, if we end up talking business as a result of that, I won’t be opposed to it.”
Thomas felt like he could almost see sparks flying between the two. They were arguing with icy smiles on their faces, their rivalry as weapons factory representatives and as women on full display. Thomas averted his eyes from the embarrassing sight. *Lord Liam sure has his hands full with these ladies, doesn’t he? But really, where is he? I’d like to see him.*
It wasn’t just these three who felt that way. Numerous people had attended the party just for the opportunity to connect with Liam. All those who searched for him were puzzled by his absence, unsuccessful in their attempts to find him.
Viscount Razel’s voice finally broke up the unsettled atmosphere. “Thank you so much for attending this party today, everyone.” From his simple opening greeting, he then moved on to announcing his daughter’s engagement.
Neither Nias nor Eulisia were too interested in the news. “Just a political marriage between nobles, eh?” Nias said.
“It happens a lot. He probably found a family with favorable prospects.”
It was pretty standard for the host to wed their daughter, if they had one, to one of the students who’d come for training. What *was* unusual about this particular union was the boy they’d chosen to wed her to.
“I’d like to introduce you to my daughter Katerina’s fiancé, Lord Peter Sera Petack.”
Quite a few of the guests who’d come so far for the celebration were surprised to see the son of House Petack introduced thereafter. Nias blithely clapped along with everyone else in the hall since she was not familiar with the family, but Eulisia was blinking, blank-faced.

Thomas himself was so astonished, he could barely process the information. "Er… Uh… Huh?"

Why would House Razel want to form ties with House Petack?! I can't think of a single reason to unite with such a family. I would think House Banfield would be the prime candidate.

Knowing the truth about House Petack's affairs from his business dealings with them, Thomas found all of this quite baffling.

Eulisia felt the same way. "That's Count Petack's son, right?" she said to Thomas. "From *the* House Petack? I hear they have vast amounts of debt and their domain isn't doing well either."

"Yes, that's what I've heard. And yes, he's definitely the son of *the* Count Petack."

Now that the engagement was public, holographic images of Peter and Katerina floated throughout the venue.

Eulisia couldn't believe what she was seeing. "I wonder if House Petack discovered some rare metal or other resource."

If that were true, then this marriage might make some sense. It was possible, but Thomas sincerely doubted it.

"I've looked into the family in the course of my own business, but I haven't heard anything like that."

While many other of the guests looked just as shocked about the announcement, Nias paid no mind to the confusion and glanced around, resuming her hunt for Liam. She pulled aside a caterer and asked, "Ah, excuse me, do you know anything about Lord Liam—Count Banfield? He's been here studying with House Razel."

The caterer looked away awkwardly. "Lord Liam, er…caused a bit of a problem at the martial arts exhibition yesterday. The viscount was furious and expelled him. It'll still be recorded that he completed his training, but he's not allowed to attend this party. He's probably at the spaceport right now."

Having overheard their conversation, Thomas couldn't understand what the caterer was saying, but his face grew a shade paler with every word. He soon began to tremble.

"Lord Liam was expelled before he could attend the celebration?"

"Yes." The caterer nodded.

Nias grabbed the caterer's shoulders and started shaking him. "Y-you can't be serious! So he's not here? Why? *Why*?!"

The caterer backed away from Nias, annoyed, and snapped, "I told you, he was kicked out! He's left the mansion, so he's probably headed for the spaceport right now. He brought this on himself for angering the viscount."

Nearby, Eulisia appeared to be contacting someone on her tablet. Thomas was already charging out of the venue, hoping to reach the boy before in time.

"Lord Liaaam!"

***

At last, House Banfield's fleet had arrived at Viscount Razel's spaceport. The ships were all lined up in formation, three hundred of them in total. House Banfield's flagship, a superdreadnought battleship, attracted attention from every other ship nearby.

House Banfield's knights—including knight-candidate Tia—alighted from the flagship and prepared to welcome Liam in the spaceport. A great number of people shuffled around eagerly at their assigned gate.

"I'd like to put up more decorations," Tia told one of the spaceport staff. "Holographic images are just too typical." Tia wanted to spruce up the plain-looking gate area.

The staff person frowned. "Give me a break—you can't just decorate this place without permission."

Tia got where he was coming from, but greeting Liam for his trip home was immensely important to her, so she was very fired up about it.

"I understand that, but we're welcoming home our lord here. I'd like the place where we greet him to look a little more grand. We'll cover all the costs… Isn't that enough?"

They were still in preparation mode because, according to Liam's original schedule, he would be departing a few days from now.

The staff person wouldn't hear it, however. "I'm sorry, you can celebrate any way you choose upon your return home." Then, he changed the subject, expressing interest in the gargantuan battleship. "Say, that's a very grand battleship, isn't it? This is the first time I've seen a superdreadnought."

"Well, it is our flagship."

"I'd expect nothing less from House Petack's fleet! Completely different from a family in decline like House Ban…field?!"

The spaceport employee nearly choked on his words as the tip of a rapier—Tia's thin-bladed sword specialized for thrusts—entered his mouth. If he so much as twitched, his mouth would be full of blood.

Tia's polite attitude from a moment ago had vanished. "I believe you've mistaken the crest of our glorious House Banfield…or did you intend to insult us?"

Seeing this, a number of the viscount's knights and soldiers in the area rushed over, and House Banfield's knights drew their own weapons. They squared off with each other warily. Tia removed her rapier from the man's mouth and grabbed him by the jaw, lifting the grown man right off of the ground.

"You mistook our crest. This is an insult to our family. Am I wrong?"

It would be one thing if this man had nothing to do with them, but Liam had been studying at this place for the last three years. For someone in this man's position to mistake Liam's crest was a terrible affront.
"I-I'm sorry. Please, let me go!"
As the man squirmed in discomfort, Tia narrowed her eyes and squeezed her hand as if to crush his throat.
"I don't believe I will! In fact…"
Just then, an alert dinged from her tablet; it was a call from Liam. Tia hurriedly tossed the worker aside and accepted the call, a small holographic window appearing before her eyes. Framed within it was Liam's face, looking rather displeased.
"L-Lord Liam! Where are you right—"
Liam's low growl cut her off. *"How dare you guys not come pick me up."* He sounded truly angry.

***

We'd come to the spaceport boarding gate assigned to House Banfield's fleet, yet there wasn't a single ship in sight.
While my two friends and I sat on a bench and waited for our ride to show, we watched TV on a large screen between two windows that looked out into space. It was the final episode of a series that was popular in House Razel's domain. As the credits started to roll, Eila peeked out one of the windows, confirming that my ships still weren't there.
"They're not coming."
I crossed my arms and drummed my fingers against them, lamenting the incompetence of my no-show subordinates. They were shaming me in front of my friends, and I couldn't let them get away with that. Kurt was even trying to be polite, which was just making me even more embarrassed.
"Just think of it this way: Now we don't have to wonder about how that show ended."
While I sat there, irritated, a nearby elevator door opened, and who should emerge from it but a sweaty Thomas Henfrey.
"Lord Liaaam!"
What are you *doing here?* I shot at him in my mind, but I didn't let my grumpiness show outwardly.
"Long time no see, Thomas. I didn't know you were here."
Thomas must have heard from someone that I was at this gate. He was gasping for breath.
"I could hardly believe it when I heard you were expelled from House Razel's mansion, Lord Liam. There are a lot of strange things happening here. I'm very confused."
Well, the world is nothing but strange things—such as my people being late to pick me up.

I answered, “The viscount just doesn’t like me. Can’t say I don’t feel the same about him.” I glanced at Brian’s bonsai, which rested next to me. *What the hell was he thinking, throwing out Brian’s prize-winning bonsai?*
“I-Is that so? You don’t see eye-to-eye with Viscount Razel, then?”
Thomas looked relieved. He’d probably been worried I’d be influenced by the virtuous Viscount Razel, but that would never happen. I wouldn’t be a true evil lord if my convictions could be swayed by someone else’s righteousness. I was evil to the core.
It had clearly been a mistake coming to study at the serious, upright House Razel, but I was the type to learn from my mistakes. I had learned a lot from my mistakes in my past life, after all.
“My time here will look good on my record, but it’s not like I’ll be making the viscount my role model or anything.”
Thomas nodded over and over again. “My company will be raising a strong objection to the viscount.”
“You don’t need to do that. I don’t plan on having anything to do with him again, after all.”
“So you’ll be returning to your domain right away?”
“Yeah, but first—”
While Thomas and I were chatting, the elevator door opened once again. Two women emerged, and Kurt looked confused.
“Huh? This gate is reserved for you, isn’t it, Liam? Are those two lost?”
“Oh, I know them.”
It was Nias and Eulisia who had appeared from the elevator. Their clothes were slightly disheveled, as if they’d hurried to get here. Having spotted me, Nias came running over, shoulders heaving with her heavy breathing.
“Ohmigod hello Lord Liam it’s been so long also please buy a fortress-class vessel!” she blurted.
I gave Nias a cold look for greeting me and beginning a sales pitch in the same breath. Eulisia looked equally disgusted with the engineer as she gingerly wiped the sweat from her brow.
“Will you stop that? It’s pathetic! Hello, my lord, it’s been a while. I heard you would be using the ships you purchased from the Third Weapons Factory today. If you would allow me to board with you, I could explain their attributes in greater detail.”
Eulisia smiled gracefully. She had dressed up to attend the party today, and her makeup looked good on her. Her outfit was alluring, and with her clothes slightly askew, it just ramped up the sexiness. Still, I had already lost interest.
“Oh, yeah? All right, you can come along,” I said matter-of-factly.
Eulisia seemed perplexed by my reaction, but I couldn’t let that bother me. I was too busy remembering my wife from my past life. Now that I thought about it, whenever she got all dressed up like this and went out with makeup on, she was on her way to cheat on me. That made women in flashy clothes a huge turn-off.

“Huh? Er, my lord? Did I do something wrong?”
Eulisia didn’t know what to make of my sudden change in attitude. She’d probably ensnared countless men with her charms. When I thought about that, my interest diminished even more. She had probably planned on seducing me today and was worried now that I didn’t appear to be taking the bait.
Nias was laughing at Eulisia. “Aw, you okay?” For her part, she was sweating as if she’d sprinted to get here. She was obviously overheated because she’d undone one of the buttons on her top and was fanning herself with her hand. I could tell this wasn’t a seductive move, however. There was nothing erotic about her appearance. Her shirt was wet with perspiration, and I could detect the faint outline of a sports bra beneath it, a purely functional garment. When Nias noticed my gaze centered squarely on her chest, she crossed her arms and smiled, looking embarrassed.
“Erm, it’s not that my pay has dropped and I can’t afford nice stuff or anything. I’m just, you know, like… Oh, right! I’ve started working out, so I’ve been wearing things like this lately!”
Nias was even more pathetic when she started making excuses for herself. How pathetic, you ask? Well, Thomas was averting his eyes, as if he were so sad that he couldn’t bear to look at her. Even Kurt, who was usually the naïve type, had caught on and was flushed with embarrassment. “So…your pay dropped,” Eila said, looking at Nias in sympathy.
Pitied by everyone around her, Nias covered her face with her hands and started crying. “It’s hard for me, okay? My livelihood is on the line here!”
Seeing Nias like this, I couldn’t help but find her kind of cute. I forgot my anger from a moment ago and reached out to her.
“How much?”
“Huh?” Nias raised her head and looked at me with tears in her eyes.
“How much for your fortress class?”
“Y-you’re going to buy it?”
“You’re so much trouble. Come on, give me the contract. It’s one ship, right?”
“Please buy a destroyer and a cruiser too! They’re brand-new ships, but we couldn’t sell them!”
“You really are too much. Three hundred max, okay?”
“Thank you so much! Yeees! Now I can finally escape poverty!”
Nias raised her arms and cheered. Every time she did, I could see through her shirt to her unsexy underwear. Yeah, I liked this practical style better. I ended up buying a fortress-class ship from her as thanks for the nice view she gave me. Amagi was sure to be pissed at me again for making this purchase without consulting anyone. Just how big was a fortress class, anyway? I still hadn’t studied military matters too deeply.
As I thought these things, Eulisia grabbed me by the arm. “W-wait a second, my lord! Sh-should you really make your decision so quickly? If you bought

from the Third Weapons Factory instead, we could prepare a fortress class for you right away—”
“Nah, it’s not like I really want one anyway, so I’m good.”
After I blew her off, Eulisia froze in place.
Nias pointed at her and laughed. “See that? This is about the bond between me and Lord Liam! There’s no room for you to sidle on in!”
She really is a mess. She’s gonna gloat right in front of me? If she didn’t do crap like this, she could pass as a cool, intellectual beauty. Well, I guess Nias is Nias. That’s fine with me.
The elevator opened again, and a female knight came flying out of it this time. She sprinted over to us and slid into a bow, halting right at my feet.
Okay, that was kinda cool.
It was Tia.
“I-I-I’m terribly sorry, Lord Liam! The spaceport staff made a mistake and directed us to the wrong part of the spacepo—ouch!”
When she looked up at me to apologize, I flicked her forehead hard.
“Don’t make excuses. All that matters is you made me wait.”
Seeing that I was a little cross with her, Tia looked absolutely devastated.
What a drama queen. If this was what passed for a talented knight, this world had some serious issues. Why did all the people around me seem so messed up?
Tia drew her sword and pressed its blade to her neck, right on her carotid artery.
“I-I offer my head as recompense!”
Are you the world’s dumbest smarty or the world’s smartest dummy? Did you really think that would please me? I recruited you for your looks, you know. I’m not expecting much from you other than that.
“Are you stupid? Hurry up and get my things—we’re going home. And don’t you dare drop that bonsai!”
“Y-yes, my lord!”
I held out my packed bag and Tia hurriedly stood and accepted it. I placed the bonsai on top of the bag.
Tia was trembling. “D-do you forgive me?”
Forgive you? You really are an idiot. An evil lord would never forgive your incompetence just for carrying his luggage.
“I’m gonna work you like a dog on my ship, so be ready for it. Kurt, Eila, give her your bags too. Just think of her as a friendly pack mule.” I motioned for the two of them to make use of her, but they didn’t seem too keen on it.
“Liam, I can’t make a woman hold my things,” Kurt said.
Eila shook her head. “Seems like you’ve got some interesting knights working for you. I’ll pass, though.”
They’re even nicer than I thought.
“It’s just punishment for her making me wait, you fools. Whatever. Let’s just go. Where’s my ride, anyway?”

“Oh, it just arrived,” Tia answered, gesturing out the window. “This is the Vár, House Banfield’s new flagship.”
Beyond the window was the superdreadnought I’d been longing to see. The Vár, crafted by the Third Weapons Factory, floated closer to the dock. I’d requested a large one, but they hadn’t sacrificed functionality in making it so big. After all, an oversized ship was only valuable if it had the firepower to back it up; otherwise, it was nothing more than a target. This was especially important since I was going to be traveling on the mammoth ship myself. We wouldn’t want it to go down too easily.
Eila was glued to the window, jumping up and down like a giddy little kid. “Wow! This is incredible! So that’s a superdreadnought?! Only lords acknowledged by the Empire can own ships like this, right? C’mon, Kurt, you gotta see this up close!”
“It *is* incredible. I can’t wait to go aboard.” Kurt seemed just as excited, albeit in his own way.
Well, I’d expect that from a guy. Eila’s going nuts, though, so I guess some girls are into ships too.
“Why don’t you buy one of your own?” I suggested.
Kurt shook his head. “I-I couldn’t. It’s too expensive, and I wouldn’t be able to get permission. Considering the maintenance costs, it’d make more sense to stick with destroyers and cruisers.”
What a pragmatic guy…though I just impulse-bought those kinds of ships from Nias too. Our military expansion plan is gonna be messed up again, but I just couldn’t help myself! It’s pretty wild that you can impulse-buy military spaceships in this world. Still, when I think about what Amagi’s gonna say when I see her…oh, man!
“I’ll give you some of my extra ships, then.”
Once Amagi discovered my extra purchases, she’d scold me for jacking up our schedule once again. But if I could foist some of them off on Kurt, they just might fly under the radar.
“Oh, no, I couldn’t do that. Battleships are overly generous gifts, don’t you think?”
He wasn’t taking the bait, so I pushed harder. I don’t wanna make Amagi mad, so I need this guy to take them before she finds out!
“Actually, I have too many, so it’d really help me out if you could take some off my hands.”
“R-really? Perhaps I will, then. It would certainly help me too. With a little fixing up, used ships will be perfectly serviceable. We need to bolster our numbers more than anything else at the moment, considering our pirate problem.”
Wait, he thinks he’s getting used ones?

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Meanwhile, Viscount Razel stood frozen in the middle of his grand party venue, absolutely bewildered. He should've been joyously mixing and mingling right about now, but most of his guests had left early. Only a third or so remained, leaving the venue fairly empty. Those out of the loop looked rather uneasy, and the viscount had ordered one of his staff to investigate the cause of this mass exodus.

"Wh-what's going on?" someone said.

At that moment, the viscount's staff member ran back to him with a report.

"Lord Randolph! S-something truly awful has happened!"

"Will you just calm down and tell me?"

Once his subordinate had caught his breath, the man made his report in earnest.

"The guests who left are all swarming the spaceport! Some sort of incident broke out there as well!"

"Why are they rushing to the spaceport?"

"Well, erm…"

"Spit it out!"

"Apparently, they're all clamoring to meet with Count Banfield, who's waiting there for his ride home. Some of these guests are also raising strong objections to his expulsion."

Humans were reactionary creatures. If a noble had shortcomings, others would quickly distance themselves from that noble. The opposite was also true; if a house was on the rise, people would flock to it. Merchants, who always had one eye on the market, were seeking to join Liam's entourage, and that meant the boy was sitting on something big.

"I want you to investigate House Banfield at once."

"Huh? But, sir, we've already done that."

"Well, do it again! Right now!"

Viscount Razel had a very bad feeling about this.

Chapter 9:
Black and White

MY FLEET MOVED through space like a beautiful array of lights forging a path through the abyss. The room prepared for me on the Vár was so gorgeous, I couldn't believe my eyes. Despite the limited space afforded to most quarters on a ship, my chambers were vast. Crew members assigned to serve me were lined up inside.

For some reason, the one who was attending to my every need was Tia, who was supposed to be a knight. She must have been eager to earn back the brownie points she'd lost for her tardiness at the spaceport, but I was actually kind of enjoying watching her grovel.

Tia offered me a drink, and when I took it, she said, "You've finished the first stage of your training now, Lord Liam. It's a wonderful achievement."

First of all, it's amazing anyone considers what I just went through "training." Second, it's pretty wild how getting through such a farce is considered a "wonderful achievement." I don't think anyone should be praised for this, so she's obviously just flattering me. I have to admit, it feels pretty good when people butter me up just because of my position.

"It was an utter waste of time. Well, I did get some things out of it." I caressed the pendant hanging around my neck—the peculiar artifact I'd discovered during my mining work. I was rather fond of its golden glimmer and intricate craftsmanship.

As I took a sip of my drink, I spotted Kurt sitting uncomfortably on a couch.

I guess he's having trouble relaxing in here.

I approached him and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just hard to believe we're really on a battleship."

Per my order, some maids stood near Kurt, tending to his needs. He was the successor to an evil lord, so I wanted him to get used to how it felt. Though I'd invited Kurt to my room, I'd sent Eila elsewhere. She was the daughter of a baron, so I couldn't just carelessly invite her to my private quarters.

"Anyway, your fleet is just three hundred ships, right?" Kurt said, changing the subject. "Are we going straight to my domain? Your troops seem ample and well trained, but you'll be up against a *lot* of pirates." Evidently, he was worried three hundred wouldn't be enough.

My eyes still fixed on him, I asked Tia, "What are we up against?"

"According to our investigation, the pirate gang lurking in Baron Exner's domain is three thousand ships strong. Their numbers aren't the only problem—they've got a fortress as well."

So this pirate gang has a secret base.

"They've probably got some treasure stashed away in there. I'm looking forward to this." Kurt still looked anxious, so I gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, I'll make sure House Exner gets 30 percent."

“Th-that’s not what I’m worried about. You’re not nervous at all? I know we’re up against pirates, but sometimes they hire mercenaries too. They’re not going to be pushovers.”
This guy really takes things too seriously. I mean, a conscientious evil lord? He’s pretty unique.
“Pirates are a wonderful resource, don’t you remember? They gather up treasure for me and grant me social standing when I defeat them. I plan on cleaning up every single one of them until none remain.”
Plus, I’ve got the Guide on my side; that’s practically divine protection. My second life has been a string of good fortune, thanks to him. I succeed at anything I set out to do.
I’d hoped to score a larger bounty, so their numbers disappointed me. Three thousand? That was nothing. It was encouraging that they had their own fortress, but I wondered if really big gangs like Goaz’s just weren’t that common.
As I pondered this, Tia knelt down and clung to my leg, her eyes blazing with determination. “Lord Liam, please let me fight in the vanguard!”
“Don’t get ahead of yourself. I’ll decide what you do.”
“I-I’m terribly sorry, sir.”
Tia backed up and knelt down again, behaving just like a dog. Kurt must have been appalled by her audacity too; he gawked at her with his mouth hanging open.
Just then, Tia received a message on her tablet. “Yes, what is it?”
When she answered the call, Tia regained the look of a competent knight, her unfortunate demeanor swept away. Kurt looked even more surprised by her rapid transformation.
I could hear a voice on the other end. “Enemy ships dead ahead. Twenty thousand of them.”
I cut in, “Enemies in our path? Are they pirates?”
“Pirates and non-pirates as well, sir.”
“Explain.”
“Well, sir, mixed in with the pirates are ships with a noble crest.”

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By the time we got to the bridge, the two fleets were already facing off. A large holographic display showed the whole battlefield, and I could tell by looking at it that the enemy was trying to surround us. Twenty thousand ships were slowly encircling House Banfield’s spherical fleet of three hundred. The difference in numbers was so vast, it made our armada look laughably small.
“Trying to box us in, eh?” I muttered.
Kurt nodded grimly, his fists shaking with rage. “They aim to encircle and eliminate. And there are a lot of them. With so many ships, they don’t need to do any clever maneuvering.”

I agreed that this number would have been difficult to fight against—with our current force, at least.
“Where’s the main force?” I asked Tia.
“They’ve already arrived.”
It was exactly as she said. Behind the widening enemy force, even more ships encroached on the display—fifteen thousand in total.
One of the bridge operators turned to me and said, “The main force has commenced firing on the enemy!”
I watched as my reinforcements attacked the pirates and their allies from behind. Caught by surprise, the enemy ships couldn’t turn around in time and were mercilessly destroyed. Some of them started charging right at us here at the core of the fight instead of trying to engage the newcomers.
“I see they don’t know when to give up. Unfortunately for them, their efforts are futile.”
The escort that had come to meet me at House Razel consisted entirely of elites. These warships were my arms and legs, outfitted with the best in both personnel and weapons.
Kurt looked panicky as the enemy charged in. “This isn’t good, Liam! They’re coming this way! We have to flee!”
“Flee? I don’t think so—we’re fighting back.”
Despite our incoming reinforcements, Kurt couldn’t believe I wanted to surge ahead with only three hundred ships.
“Wait, we can’t do that, Liam! The enemy’s ready for us!”
I ignored him and gave my order to Tia. “All ships, prepare to charge.”
Tia was flushed, panting, and sweating. Her sadistic side kicked in when she fought against pirates, but then again, she had spent many long years being tortured by a pirate gang.
“Wipe out all of Lord Liam’s enemies!” she cried.
Kurt was aghast at Tia’s excitement. He once again tried to talk me out of my decision. “Liam, this is too dangerous! There are too many of them! Even with the main force behind them, we—”
The remaining enemies who rushed toward us numbered around three thousand ships—about ten times my escort fleet.
“It’s fine. Those numbers mean nothing to me.”
I had the Guide, my guardian deity of good luck, on my side. Plus, the military I’d been putting together all this time wouldn’t lose to an enemy like this.

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Observing the scene from out in space, the Guide writhed in pain.
“No way! You’ve gotta be kidding me! Why did you bring so many allies with you?! Why?!”
The Guide thought Liam’s fleet would consist of no more than a few hundred ships, so he’d expected to see it crushed by a force many times

that number, yet the fleet that had come to rendezvous with Liam's escort consisted of more than fifteen thousand vessels.
He was awash with disbelief. None of it seemed possible. It was almost as if Liam had been anticipating this ambush.
"My plan is ruined! I used the last of my power to make this happen…"
The Guide had worked hard to pull these ships together from both pirates and House Petack. It was basically the full force of both groups. The Guide hadn't actually been able to affect much himself, but the combination of rogues and nobles should have been enough to crush a single boy-count. With these surprise reinforcements, the tables had turned in Liam's favor.
Curling up into a ball in the air, the Guide buried his face in his knees and muttered, "It's over… It's all over…"
Even before the battle was done, the Guide had already resigned himself to Liam's victory.

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The pirates were quaking with fear. Their leader, sitting in the commander's chair on the bridge of his ship, couldn't comprehend what he was seeing.
"I-I didn't hear anything about this! This kid's the real deal! Wasn't House Banfield supposed to be a poor ol' family way out in the boonies?"
They were up against fifteen thousand ships. With House Petack's ships in the mix, they had started with over twenty thousand. Now, even though they'd still had an advantage of five thousand ships, they were being overwhelmed by the enemy. Their noble allies were being obliterated all around them, and the pirates had been cornered almost instantly. They tried to come back from the brink by focusing their attack on Liam's presumed flagship, but the original three-hundred-ship fleet was fierce, pummeling all contenders.
"Why does House Banfield even have a monster like a superdreadnought?"
If the pirates' boss had known a ship like that would be among their enemies, he never would have picked a fight with House Banfield.
He watched, horrified, as the superdreadnought fired on the ship right next to his and blew it to pieces. The vessel was turned into space debris, which rattled his ship as it crashed into the hull. Conversely, *their* attacks couldn't even get through the superdreadnought's energy shields to reach its armor.
"Boss!" one of the pirates shouted, his eyes teary and bloodshot. "House Petack's ships are breaking and running! S-some of them intend to surrender!"
House Petack's fleet, as poorly trained as its personnel were, was swiftly falling against House Banfield's ships, their initial numerical advantage plummeting.
"Those guys have state-of-the-art ships, and they're fleeing *now*? This is why I hate nobles!"

House Petack had attacked House Banfield from the pirates' shadows, but as soon as they'd realized they couldn't win, the survivors had begun to cave. They weren't the elite military the rumors at House Razel chalked them up to be. It had all been a sham.
"We're getting out of this, no matter what," the boss declared. "Even if we have to use our allies as shields, we'll get through this!"
Thus, the pirates also gave up on fighting House Banfield and began their retreat.

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The battle between House Banfield and the Petack pirate fleet had been raging for days. Kurt sat on the bridge of the Vár, surprised by the strength of House Banfield's forces.
They're strong. Too strong. Could they be on the same level as the Imperial Army?
After some consideration, he decided the strength of his friend's military must be comparable to that of the Imperial regular army. Whether you looked at the quality of its equipment or the level of their troops' training, the Banfield force was superior to the average lord's private army.
All this time, Liam's ships pursued the fleeing pirates and their remaining allies and thoroughly crushed them.
Just then, they received a communication from House Petack's flagship. When Tia saw the incoming call, she shot a look at Liam, who grinned and said, "We can hear what they have to say, at least."
"Yes, sir! Patch it through."
With Tia's authorization, a Petack soldier appeared on one of the bridge monitors. The man sat on the bridge of his own ship but it was in utter chaos behind him.
"This is House Petack's flagship, Peter II. We surrender! I repeat, we surrender!" The soldier's voice cracked with desperation, and screams could be heard amid the cacophony around him.
By contrast, the bridge of House Banfield's flagship was quiet and orderly. The officers handed out orders, and the operators performed their duties, everyone calm and professional.
Kurt glanced at Tia, who was glaring at the enemy soldier on the screen. He was in awe of how a knight like her could lead Liam's fleet so effectively.
I knew she was no ordinary knight, but it's incredible that she can command a fleet of this size. Liam has people like this working for him?
However, she also reminded him of the knights from his home world whose devotion to their lord was more akin to fanatic idolization. The way Tia looked at Liam was something he'd seen all too often back home, if not even more intense.
Tia was asking Liam what they would do about House Petack now. "Lord Liam, House Petack has officially surrendered. They may have collaborated

with pirates, but continuing to go after them will be more trouble than it's worth. Shall we accept their surrender?"
She knew they couldn't reasonably beat down the other noble house much longer, but she hated those nobles for stooping so low. How dare they join forces with a pirate gang? Her face was set in a hard scowl, her fists clenched. Try as she might, she couldn't accept it.
Just by looking at her, Kurt could tell the woman despised pirates beyond words. He even heard a creaking sound from her tightly clenched fists.
This is it, he thought to himself. If this escalates into a full-on war between two houses, things'll get really bad. House Petack has surrendered, so Liam has to accept.
Imperial nobles did attack each other now and then, sometimes under the guise of piracy, and such clashes were expected to follow a particular pattern.
The dame is right; squabbles between lords are more trouble than they're worth. It's the unspoken rule in the Empire to accept a surrender when it's offered. That's all he can do.
All sorts of issues might arise from grudges between nobles. Once the fight reached a certain point, it was best to back off, let things die down, and count one's losses.
However, it seemed to the others that Liam was feigning ignorance.
"House Petack? Those guys look like House Petack to you? I'm just not seeing it. All the ships in front of us are pirate ships, are they not?"
Hearing this, the House Petack soldier on the monitor began to panic.
"Wh-what are you… We are House Petack's—"
Tia cut the transmission before the man could finish.
Having declared that House Petack was clearly not involved, Liam grinned from ear to ear. "Those pirates can't fool me. There's no way the virtuous House Petack would play pirate, so clearly they're pirates misrepresenting themselves as nobles. What reason do we have to accept their surrender?"
At that moment, the eyes of everyone on the bridge snapped wide. They knew the truth of the matter, yet they didn't contradict him. Tia beamed, more than happy to back up her lord on this matter. She said, "I apologize for my foolish question. We will continue our assault."
"Annihilate every last one of them."
Upon hearing this, Kurt was compelled to make sure Liam knew what he was getting into. "Liam, are you sure? This is House Petack you're fighting!"
If Liam destroyed a ship that had declared surrender, he would be striking not only House Petack, but everyone who associated with them. He had to realize this, but his delight showed no signs of faltering.
"I know what I'm doing. Anyway, we're just about finished here… I'm going back to my room to rest. Are you coming too?"
Kurt shook his head. "No. I'd like to stay here and watch, if you don't mind."
"Oh? Well, suit yourself."

As Kurt watched Liam coolly leave the bridge, he heard Tia proudly say, “That’s our Lord Liam.”
“Real noble lords are incredible,” Kurt murmured. “I understand why my father and I are considered upstarts now.”
Kurt wouldn’t have been able to make such a daring move. He would have considered all the ramifications and let House Petack go, but Liam had knowingly chosen a different course.
“They’re all pirates. You should just think of it that way too, Lord Kurt.”
Kurt recalled what Liam had told him. “If I say black is white, then white it shall be.”
Easier said than done, but Liam can actually make that a reality. If Liam insisted that House Petack’s ships were pirate ships in disguise, then pirate ships they were. Kurt was in awe of the boy’s incredible resolve.
“No wonder he’s so strong… He’s completely steadfast in his beliefs.”
Only then did Kurt notice that he was trembling from head to toe. He was glad he hadn’t made an enemy of Liam, but at the same time, he held an odd desire to face off against him. To be more precise, he wanted to fight him again as a swordsman, but he knew he should never, ever make an enemy of him as a lord.
He clenched his fist. “I want to learn more from Liam.”
His training at House Razel had left him unsatisfied, but he felt truly fortunate that he had been able to meet Liam and strike up a friendship with him.
Meanwhile, the battle continued until House Banfield had ruthlessly crushed almost the entirety of House Petack’s fleet along with the pirate gang.

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After returning to my room, I sat down on the couch and kicked my feet up.
“Those pirates were idiots. I can’t believe they tried to pass themselves off as House Petack, of all things.”
Sometimes, pirates would masquerade as some noble’s fleet—an especially serious crime. These fools probably thought that if they disguised themselves as a well-known family like House Petack, we would bow to their superiority.
Their mistake was that I *knew* House Petack. From what I’d heard at House Razel, House Petack was made up of picture-perfect nobles, a benevolent family who were good to their people and governed with a steady hand. It was clear enough from their heir, Peter, that the family didn’t put much stock in personal martial prowess, but their military was supposed to be superlative. And yet, the fleet trying to pass itself off as House Petack was composed of only aged, worn-down ships. It just wasn’t realistic. Maybe they’d pulled this off before, but this time, they picked the wrong house to imitate. What villains.

“Of course, I’m a bigger villain than those pirates.”
Truth be told, nobles were essentially just pirates at heart. The ones who had better manners and properly managed home planets were nobles, and the ones who roamed about freely and did as they pleased were pirates, but they were the same beast at the core. They both wielded their might to steal from others in order to prosper—one group just called it taxes.
In fact, this made nobles even nastier villains than pirates, and among their ilk, I was the lowest of the low.

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As a guest on the Vár, Eila had been taken to a heavily armored shelter room when the battle had started. The room was staffed with maids and had plenty of amenities, as befitted her status as Baron Berman’s daughter, but she wasn’t the only one in it; Nias and Eulisia had also been brought there. As employees of Imperial weapons factories, they were being given the same treatment as Eila.
Eila sat in a chair and listened to the back-and-forth between the two saleswomen.
Presently, Nias was lashing out at Eulisia. “What’s with the specs of this shelter? Looks to me like there are some issues with the armor material.”
“We ran plenty of endurance tests with this material. It will hold up if worse comes to worst. I don’t suppose you’ve heard the term ‘overengineering,’ have you? You people at the Seventh are far too obsessed with performance. Have you never heard of the price-performance ratio?”
“I’m sorry—you want us to cut corners to keep costs down, like you? Not happening. Your price-performance ratio is the reason Lord Liam’s abandoned you!”
Confronted with Nias’s triumphant face, Eulisia bit her lip. She wanted to refute it, but Liam truly did appear to have lost interest in her.
“I-I’m sure it was just that my outfit at the time wasn’t to his tastes.”
Nias smirked, relishing Eulisia’s sour grapes.
Watching the two of them, Eila asked them—particularly Nias—something she’d been wondering for a while. “What kind of women does Liam like, anyway? You said you’ve known him since he was a kid, Miss Engineering Captain?”
Nias pushed her glasses up her nose, trying to play the part of an intellectual beauty. She was able to pull it off…until she opened her mouth.
“Oh? Curious, are we?”
“Very!”
Eulisia, however, was a little hesitant in response to Eila’s enthusiasm. “I understand you are Baron Berman’s daughter? Pursuing a relationship with the count might be difficult. The lowest noble a count would typically marry is a viscount’s daughter. Or are you aiming to be a concubine?”

It was difficult for nobles of vastly different ranks to get married, but that didn’t appear to be what Eila had in mind.
“Me and Liam? No way.”
“Oh, is it Lord Kurt, then?” Nias guessed. “You could certainly marry into Baron Exner’s family. If you promise to make use of the Seventh Weapons Factory in the future, I’ll be sure to put in a good word for you.”
Eulisia couldn’t believe Nias had promised to support their romance if the girl patronized her company. “You’re so greedy.”
“Not as much as you.”
They started glaring at each other again.
Eila tilted her head in puzzlement. “Huh? No, that’s not it either.”
“Really?” Eulisia said, equally confused. “The way you look at them is so heated, I just assumed you had romantic feelings for one or the other.”
Eulisia and Nias had both noticed the passionate stare that Eila sometimes directed at the two boys, but when Eila replied to them, it didn’t come across that she was hiding her true feelings.
“No way. I mean, I’m pretty much a baron’s daughter in name only. I wouldn’t dream of marrying either of them to unite our houses.”
Then what was with the feverish gaze she was always sending their way?
Nias and Eulisia exchanged a confused glance.

Chapter 10:
The One That Got Away

WHILE THE PETACK and pirate ships were being utterly obliterated, Peter was on his way home with Katerina at his side. When Peter's fleet had come to pick them up, the viscount's daughter hadn't been able to hide her confusion. All of his ships were obviously old, and they performed as poorly as their shabbiness suggested. Even the Peter III, the ship that was ferrying the heir to his home world, was several centuries past its prime. The ship's interior practically screamed "retro," though its exterior had been updated to look rather gaudy. At first glance, the outside made it hard to determine its true age.

Peter's rooms inside the ship were unnecessarily extravagant. There was an overly large bedroom, a recreation room, and a party hall, all equipped with frivolous amenities and occupying precious space on the ship. With his preference for style over substance, the aged vessel performed all the poorer.

But Peter was completely oblivious. "What do you think of my ship? It's the greatest, isn't it?"

Katerina didn't know how to respond. "I-It's very, er…vintage? Antique? It certainly surprised me."

Peter was pleased to hear what he took as heartfelt praise. "It's *amazing*, right? I'm quite fond of it. It's probably the *best* ship we have," he gloated in his usual drawling voice.

Katerina was stupefied. This is the best? How bad are the others?!

Hand-me-downs from the Imperial regular army would be more impressive than the Peter III. Katerina decided to give Peter some helpful advice, thinking this could not be allowed to go on.

"I-I think I'd prefer a smaller ship, like a cruiser. The new ones are really high-performance; you could get a good deal if you bought one used from the Imperial Army."

I'd rather be on a cruiser from the Imperial Army's junkyard than this sluggish old target. Maybe I should ask my father to give us one of his? I'm worried about what'll happen on this thing if I don't.

Katerina had been uneasy the whole time she'd been aboard this ship. She had no idea when this thing might break down and become a sitting duck out in space. Peter didn't have an ear to lend to her, though.

"A cruiser wouldn't do. If I were going to buy a new ship, I'd want a superdreadnought, but the *Empire* won't allow us to own one."

"Huh? They won't?" Katerina's eyes flew open wide. Hadn't her family's background checks on House Petack found that they *had* been granted permission by the Empire to purchase a superdreadnought?

“Yeah. We asked, but they just won’t give us the okay for some reason. Sooo stingy.”
Oversized vessels like superdreadnoughts and fortress-class ships like carriers could only be sold to families who’d received special permission from the Empire. It was a ritual that signified the level of trust the Empire had in the family.
Katerina’s confusion was edging toward panic. This isn’t what I heard at all! This was supposed to be a house I could marry into with pride! Was all our information wrong?
Just listening to Peter talk was crushing Katerina with uncertainty, but Peter was blissfully ignorant of her anxiety, boasting now about something completely unrelated.
“You know, one could say I’ve really *grown* these last three years. One part in particular has doubled in size…”
Katerina ignored his vulgar comment and contemplated her future.
I’ll have to contact Father and see if we can break off the engagement. House Razel will be dragged into the mud if we join hands with this crude house.
The thought terrified her.

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Back at House Razel’s mansion, the viscount read through a report with quivering hands. It said the exact opposite as the original report he’d received.
“We mistook House Banfield for House Petack?”
The two reports were completely the same except that Liam’s and Peter’s names and pictures had been swapped. Viscount Razel couldn’t stop shaking at this revelation. He simply couldn’t believe it. He didn’t *want* to believe it. How was such a mistake even made in the first place? These thoughts streamed through his mind, and he shook his head as if to banish them.
“I have to order those pirates to call off their plan. I-If I don’t hurry, House Razel is done for!”
And yet, the battle was already long underway. The viscount’s only option was to send his own fleet to aid House Banfield, going up against the pirate gang himself. He made the decision to do just that, but before he could act on it, he received an emergency communication.
“Lord Randolph!”
One of his subordinates was calling to report the pirates’ crushing defeat. To make matters worse, the majority of House Petack’s fleet had been wiped out as well, its remnants fleeing to House Razel’s territory for assistance.

“House Petack has requested aid, so we’re preparing to resupply their ships and perform maintenance at the spaceport! But considering their numbers, we may be short on supplies.”
“N-no! Turn them away! Do not aid them!” Viscount Razel shouted.
His subordinate was stunned. House Razel had just gone to great lengths to join hands with House Petack.
“Huh? Sir, we can’t just turn them away—our houses are bonded by Lady Katerina’s engagement and our military alliance.”
Viscount Razel held his head in his hands. Along with the engagement, they’d entered into various contracts with House Petack, and it was all coming back to bite him now.
“Th-this can’t be… It’s impossible! House Petack’s and House Banfield’s reputations were switched? How could that happen?”
Everything that he’d found appealing about House Petack had actually come from House Banfield, yet Viscount Razel had treated the young Count Banfield extremely poorly. In the end, he’d even expelled the boy without letting him attend the farewell party. Viscount Razel doubled over, stricken by the enormity of the truth, but the bad news just kept coming. This time, it was a call from his daughter, Katerina.
“Father!”
He prepared to tell her that this wasn’t a good time, but his mad quaking grew violent when he heard what she had to say.
“I’m in House Petack’s territory now, but something’s wrong with this place! It’s not developed at all—it’s completely different from what we heard! Already there are all these debt collectors demanding House Razel help pay back some of House Petack’s debt. Peter’s parents are visiting the Imperial Home Planet, and when I contacted them about this, they told me we have to bail them out and wouldn’t say anything else!”
If House Petack expected financial assistance from House Razel because of the union between their heirs, that was one thing, but a viscount paying off a *count’s* enormous debts was unthinkable. Yes, House Razel was a relatively affluent family, but there were limits to what could be expected of them.
“And… Um…”
“There’s more?” Viscount Razel didn’t want to hear anything else, but Katerina proceeded to deliver the final blow.
“Peter…has an STD. I-I guess it’s been going around our domain. J-just a little while ago, his…his you-know-what… It exploded!”
When the viscount heard this, everything went black.

***

My fleet finally reached Baron Exner’s domain. Well, most of my fleet; I’d left about three thousand ships behind to mop up the rest of the pirates. I

brought about twelve thousand vessels to the Exners' territory, but House Exner didn't have the facilities to maintain such a huge armada.
Baron Exner, speaking to me through a monitor, sincerely apologized. *"I'm so sorry, my lord!"* He himself commanded a few hundred ships as part of our pirate-hunting expedition. I kind of savored his groveling, the desperate attitude of an inferior noble toward a count.
"Don't worry about it. I'm transporting supplies from my own domain."
The baron's eyes flicked briefly to Kurt, who was on the bridge with me.
"Not only did you bring my son home, but you're already prepared to assist us in combat against the pirates who plague my territory. I am truly grateful."
"Don't mention it."
We decided to have Kurt experience his first battle from my mothership. He was pretty much a spectator this time around; we couldn't have him charging headlong into his very first fight. As part of our families' new relationship, I was treating him to a front-row seat.
Unfortunately, nobles usually weren't acknowledged until after they'd experienced their first battle. They were taken lightly if they hadn't. It was pretty messed up.
Baron Exner was a former knight, a military man who'd risen to noble status. For that reason, he faced this mission with practiced calm. He shared the latest update on the situation with us. *"The enemy seems to have merged with another pirate gang. Reports indicate they've added several hundred ships to their forces."*
"They won't be a problem."
"You know of them?"
"We've crossed paths. I let them go on purpose so we could follow them back to their nest, but it seems they fled here. Lucky me."
I'd allowed some of the pirates who'd attacked us in Viscount Razel's domain to escape so we could find their base. Instead, they'd come all the way here, looking to join up with the pirate scum in House Exner's domain.
"Lord Liam, it's time," Tia said, notifying me that our attack was about to commence.
I confirmed the opening moves of our joint mission with Baron Exner, then ended our communication.
Turning to look at Kurt, I asked, "You sure you don't want to go ride with your dad?"
"No, he told me to stay with you since I'd be safer here. Besides, I want to see how you do things."
Kurt would remain on the bridge to experience the battle, but I'd instructed Eila to stay in the shelter chamber for her own safety, as frustrating as that might've been for her.
"Well, get ready to witness your first combat, Kurt. Tia, let's go—time for a sortie."
I left the bridge, and Tia jumped to accompany me.

“Sir!”

***

The Vár’s hangar was so vast, it was hard to believe we were still aboard a ship. It felt as though we’d entered some gargantuan fortress. A spotlight illuminated my personal craft, the Avid. The two large shields mounted on its shoulders were especially striking. Small or medium mobile knights as tall as fourteen to eighteen meters were commonplace, but the Avid was a particularly large one at twenty-four meters. It had a hulking look that tended to intimidate those piloting other crafts. Naturally, it took up extra space in the hangar, but no one in my crew dared complain. After all, I was the highest-ranked person on this ship.

I donned my powered piloting suit, then approached the Avid. Nias, who was performing a final check on the machine, noticed me and came flying over. The hangar was zero gravity, so she moved freely through the air.

“Your craft’s in perfect condition, Lord Liam. You can sortie whenever you’re ready.”

I floated up to the cockpit and rested my hand on the Avid. “After three years, I can finally cut loose again. I appreciate your maintenance work during that time, Nias.”

Nias scanned the hangar, looking displeased. “If you *really* appreciated my work, then you’d buy your mobile knights from the Seventh too. The rest of these crafts are all from the Third, aren’t they?”

It was just as she said. Apart from the Avid, all the mobile knights standing at the ready in the hangar had been acquired from the Third Weapons Factory. It was a spectacular sight to see them all lined up in the hangar. Each craft could have belonged to an elite division or a special forces unit of the Imperial Army.

“But just look at these beauties!” I said.

“We’d be able to give you better-performing units.”

“Your crafts are lacking because you still don’t take looks into account.”

The Seventh Weapons Factory persisted in emphasizing performance without giving enough thought to the importance of appearance. The Avid was a Seventh product, but none of their other mobile knights looked good enough to impress me, so I didn’t care to use them.

“People say that, and I realize it affects sales, but can you win a war with looks? It’s what’s inside that’s important!”

“Then make mobile knights that look good on the inside too. If you do, I’ll buy ’em from you for a good price.”

“You promise? You’d better, okay?” Nias lunged forward like I’d made a binding commitment. “How many will you buy?”

“I said *if* you can make them look good! I’m not expecting much, though, so why don’t you just give up on this?”

“Ooh, you’re gonna regret that!” Nias said, clearly up to the challenge. Her attitude toward me was incredibly rude, considering our difference in status, but I let it go—not because I was being nice, but because I needed a skilled technician who could perform maintenance on the Avid. It was a real pain not having spare personnel for this sort of thing.

I climbed up into the Avid’s cockpit, which was far larger than it looked from the outside. Impossibly large, in fact, since it had been expanded using spatial magic. That was a special feature only possible in a super-expensive, highly customized craft like mine.

I sat down in the pilot’s seat that floated in this expansive cockpit, and displays came to life all around me. When I grabbed the control sticks, the Avid scanned me, performing a check of my physical health. Satisfied, the machine activated in earnest, and its engines roared to life—at least, my monitors indicated they did. Sound was dampened so much in the cockpit that I only felt the slightest vibration.

I checked outside and confirmed that the hangar mechanics who’d been swarming around were moving safely away from the Avid. Nias had distanced herself as well, and she waved at me. The Avid would move in whatever way I imagined, so it would respond with even the slightest input from me. With the mobile knight’s great arm, I waved back to her.

“Whoops—that’s hardly dignified. I need to remember I’m a villain.”

I was aiming to be an evil lord, but I was more of a play-acting villain at the moment, so I really needed to work on my dignity to look the part.

“All right, time to head out… Hm?”

I looked over just in time to see Tia preparing to board a Third Weapons Factory mobile knight with Eulisia by her side.

***

The mobile knights Liam bought from the Third Weapons Factory were smaller than the Avid. At about eighteen meters tall, these machines would be classified as medium-sized craft, a more mainstream model. Like the Avid, these mobile knights were humanoid and clad in armor. Boosters completed the look, forming a sort of flaring cape that almost looked like wings. This gave the craft the appearance of a noble, winged knight.

Most of these mobile knights were a uniform gray, their faceless, helmeted heads sporting a vertical optical strip in the shape of an I. They held shields in their left hands and stored swords inside their frames. In their right hands, as they waited to sortie, they held rifles. Despite being mass-produced, these were high-spec, elite crafts.

Tia was in her pilot suit now, getting a rundown of her craft from Eulisia.

“The Third Weapons Factory has full confidence in these units, which we call Nemain-types. An elite force of the Imperial Army intends to adopt these units too, so that should indicate their performance.”

“No complaints about their specs. I also like that they can be personalized. Mine looks fantastic in white and blue.”
Tia had requested a specific color scheme for her craft, along with some other modifications. It stood out among the other units and would perform a bit better than the rest. Her craft was mostly white with a slender visor protruding from its head. Tia’s craft also carried no shield, a sign of her confidence that she could simply dodge all of her enemy’s attacks.
Despite her role as a salesperson of military equipment, Eulisia seemed unsettled by the frantic, pre-combat air in the hangar.
Tia gave the anxious woman a smile. “Oh? Is this your first real fight?”
“Of course it is. If I hadn’t been riding on the Vár, I probably wouldn’t have come along at all. Not even for a little.”
Eulisia figured she’d be safe on a superdreadnought, even on a battlefield—high-spec ship that it was—but there were no absolutes in battle. Now, with combat close at hand, Eulisia couldn’t help being nervous.
“You’ll be able to see Lord Liam fighting up close. You should be happier about this.”
“Uh, definitely not,” Eulisia said. Liam’s fighters—Tia included—were heading into battle in machines they’d just received and had never operated before, and that kicked her anxiety up a notch. “Do you really have sufficient training for this equipment? If you leap into a real battle without being familiar with them, you won’t be able to make full use of their abilities.”
Eulisia appeared to be worried for the pilots’ safety, but she was actually concerned as to whether they’d pilot the brand-new crafts effectively.
“We’ve earned experience in education capsules and simulators, so all that’s left is to try them out in real combat. This is great, isn’t it? We’re giving your crafts their trial run!”
Even though she was about to head into battle, Tia was in a sunny mood. While she talked, she adjusted a sword that she wore in a scabbard. The pilots’ tight-fitting powered suits were covered in sensors that translated their movements to the mobile knights, so the operators brought weapons like swords and spears with them into their crafts. The mobile knights would duplicate the movements with their own weapons.
Eulisia was aghast. “Come on, you don’t have anywhere *near* enough training to say you’ve mastered the units!”
“Our duty is merely to do as Lord Liam wills. He granted me this personalized craft, so I have to show him that I’m worth the expense.” Tia was absolutely starry-eyed over her mobile knight, but the expression of rapture on her face slowly hardened into a fierce, icy smile. “When I think about all the pirates I’ll be able to destroy with this machine… Hee hee hee!”
Suddenly terrified of this woman, Eulisia said, “A-aren’t you scared?”
Tia flipped her long, blonde hair and turned around, her green eyes glimmered. “Why should I be scared? The fun’s just getting started!”

When Tia’s exclamation echoed through the hangar, all the other crafts’ vertical eyes flashed as if to agree with her. Each I-shaped optical strip seemed to share that same bewitching light in Tia’s eyes.

***

The pirates from House Razel’s domain sat in a meeting room inside the other gang’s fortress. At the opposite end of the table, the head honcho blew out smoke from a cigarette-like device clamped in his mouth.
Aware of his weaker position, the leader of the refugee pirates said, “Thanks, brother! You really saved our skins.”
The big boss snorted at the other man. They already knew each other and shared a relationship much like siblings, but the big boss looked down coldly at his “younger brother,” who had lost the majority of his organization because of one bad move.
“Guess you’ve lost your touch, considering you got bested by some noble brat and came cryin’ to me.”
“I-I’m ashamed to admit it, but you’re right. This kid really is strong, though. It was like fighting the regular army!”
“Sure it was. Anyway, now that you’re here, you’ll be working for me. And I mean *for* me, not *with* me.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?!”
“You think we’re on equal footing? You, boss of a gang with not even a hundred ships left, and me, with three thousand ships and a fortress?”
The displaced pirate leader had been in a superior position back when he was working with House Razel, but now that he’d lost most of his gang, he couldn’t stand up to the man in front of him.
“I-I got it.”
“Good,” the big boss said with a smirk. “Anyway, who’s this noble you picked a fight with? Must be somebody with a solid reputation, right?”
“Some house called Banfield. A kid named Liam runs the show. Our info said he was just some spoiled brat, but—”
“Did you just say ‘Banfield’?!”
The man thought he’d be laughed at for admitting to losing to a mere kid, but the big boss and his men had an unexpected reaction. The big boss suddenly started trembling, and the cigarette device dropped from his mouth to the table.
He pointed at the other boss with a shaking finger, his voice strained. “Y-you’re tellin’ me…you picked a fight with Liam Sera Banfield?!”
The pirate leader had clearly lost his composure. In fact, he was terrified. The lower-ranked fellow couldn’t comprehend why. “What, you know him?”
“Are you *kidding*? There’s only one Liam I know! He’s the kid who made a name for himself by killin’ Goaz! You didn’t hear about that?!”

At the big boss's shout, several armed men entered the room. Surrounded by fearsome bodyguards, the lesser boss and his men were absolutely bewildered.
"H-hey, what's all this about?"
"You picked a fight with Pirate-Hunter Liam—a lunatic who's made it his mission to wipe out every last living pirate—and then you had the nerve to come to *my* base!"
The big boss whipped out a handgun and pulled the trigger, shooting the other man dead in his seat. In his wild terror, he even fired off a few more bullets.
"This is all your fault! It's all your fault!"
The big boss knew Liam's name and his nickname all too well. The noble rejected every single pirate's existence.
After he'd killed the pirate from Razel's domain and his lackeys, another one of his subordinates rushed into the room. For a moment, this man was shocked by the gruesome sight, but he quickly pulled himself together and made his report.
"B-Boss, I got bad news! House Exner's fleet and House B-B-B-Banfield's fleet are on their way to the fortress!"
When he heard this, the big boss went pale. A huge monitor covered one of the room's walls and displayed the situation outside. On the screen, ships with House Banfield's crest were bearing down on their asteroid fortress.
"Contact them immediately. W-we're surrendering."
At the big boss's words, all his men rushed to carry out his order.

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House Banfield's force had just received a communication from the pirates. It was an immediate surrender.
"We surrender—please just let us go! We haven't done anything to you. We have nothing to do with the guys who fled here!"
Despite being the leader of a pirate gang so big it had its own asteroid fortress, the boss pleaded frantically with the commander in charge of Liam's fleet. With Liam and Tia ready to embark outside in their mobile knights, the commander had been left to oversee the military operation.
The commander sat on the bridge of the Vár, casually sipping coffee as he took the pirate leader's call. "Oh? That's interesting."
Evidently, the pirates were desperate to avoid a fight. They knew that no pirates had ever fought against Liam and lived to tell the tale. When House Banfield went after pirates, the fight didn't end until every last one of the outlaws was dead.
"I killed the man who picked a fight with you. I'll send his head to you right now to prove it! I'll even hand over all the treasure in our possession! Just, please, accept our surrender!" In contrast to the calm commander, the pirate boss was sweating profusely. "We'll do anything you say!"

When he heard this, the commander chuckled. For a moment, the boss hoped that his offer of surrender had been accepted, but…
“Save your babbling for dreamland. We don’t even care about the pirates who fled to you; we’re here to aid Baron Exner. You’ve been doing as you please in House Exner’s domain all this time, and now you turn around and shamelessly beg for your life?”
“Wh-what?”
“You know what it is we do with pirates like you, don’t you?”
“But we haven’t done you any harm! We’ve never been anywhere near House Banfield’s territory! S-so—”
“We don’t negotiate with pirates, even if they present us with the heads of our other enemies. Anyway, we let the man you killed go on purpose; you were simply unlucky enough to be the ones he looked to for safety.”
“What?! Y-you’re gonna kill us because we were unlucky?!”
“That’s right. That is Lord Liam’s order.”
“Y-you can’t be serious! Who do you think you people are? What gives you the right to play with our lives?!”
“Do all pirates have a script they follow in these situations? I’m tired of hearing the same thing from every single one of you. Lord Liam has his own scripted message to pass along to the likes of you: ‘It’s your own fault for showing yourselves to me.’ Well, I suppose I do have a little sympathy for you people, making an enemy of Lord Liam as you have.”
The pirate boss opened his mouth to shout, but the commander cut off their communication first. He sighed. “How unsightly. The ones who have some backbone will be a bit of trouble, but look at their leader hiding in his fortress like a coward. I guess it’s to be expected.”
Kurt, who’d heard the exchange, hung his head and clenched his fists until his knuckles went white. “I feel pathetic knowing that my family and subjects have been tormented by these people while I was away. Whatever their reasons, I can’t forgive them.” A tempest of rage brewed inside him. These pirates seemed to think that they could act as they pleased as long as they were far away from Liam’s territory. Their surrender carried no shame or guilt for the harm they’d inflicted on House Exner.
Liam’s commander looked at Kurt with compassion. “I can see you’ll make a fine ruler, Lord Kurt. You have a great disposition for it.”
“I hope so.”
“Lord Liam calls you a friend. That’s proof enough you should be confident in yourself.”
But Kurt wasn’t so sure they had that sort of relationship. Can I really be Liam’s friend? Can I stand on equal footing with him when he’s been mentoring me all this time?
He shook his head and expressed his doubts. “Liam can’t depend on me enough to call me a friend. I spent all my time in training learning from him. One day I’d like to become a *true* noble, like Liam.”

Kurt admired Liam for never backing down from his convictions and for never allowing injustice. The boy could be a little crude, but to Kurt, Liam was the ideal noble and role model.
The commander smiled. To him, Kurt's self-doubts further illustrated the boy's fine qualities. "I think Lord Liam found himself a wonderful friend during his training. We were all relieved to hear it. Sending him off like that worried us all; we feared he would imitate the attitudes of a noble family with different values and stray from his path."
"Liam? He would never. He stuck to his beliefs all throughout his stay at House Razel."
"Even more of a relief, then. I should have expected as much from him. Well, his tendency to charge into battle himself hasn't changed either…"
The commander shook his head, looking a little exasperated. "Now, then, let's begin the operation."
The ships that had been standing by proceeded forward, and mobile knights launched from them one after another.
Denied their surrender, the pirates commenced a desperate counterattack. The operation to capture the enemy fortress was underway.

***

Once I'd sortied from the Vár's hangar, I was greeted with a different view of the battle than I had aboard the ship. Our fleet surrounded the asteroid fortress, which fired at us with cannons around its perimeter. Light beams streaked toward us, and the resulting debris also came our way. They were even launching small asteroids, several meters in diameter, at us. I bisected one of these with the laser blade in the Avid's hand.
"I'm a little rusty after my so-called training. I would have improved more just by staying home and living my life normally."
It had hurt, not being able to practice the Way of the Flash to my heart's content during my noble training. I'd have to get back into shape once I was back home.
The pirates' base ensconced within the asteroid was heavily fortified, like a hedgehog. "Yeah, it'd be hard to take a fort like this." I found myself smiling. I liked an actual challenge, and prior to my training, I'd grown bored with fighting ships.
Blazing laser beams struck the Avid, but the shields mounted on its shoulders generated a protective field that repelled them. No light-based attacks would reach it.
"Well, I could charge in, but…" I contemplated plunging toward the base and forcing my way through their defenses, but I sort of wanted to hang back a bit and get a bird's-eye view of what capturing a fortress looked like.
Should I take all the glory for myself or just observe? While I was mulling this over, Tia's mobile knight approached me.
"Lord Liam, we will commence our incursion of the fortress."

“You’re already going inside?”
“Yes. We’re deploying our landing force now.”
It seemed our strategy was to send in a small unit of mobile knights, then have a landing force of soldiers in powered suits take the fortress from inside.
“Will this unit be enough?”
“Of course it will. We’ll disable some of their main defense systems, but since we are going to be within enemy territory, time is of the essence.”
“I’d like to see this. I think I’ll join you.”
“S-sir? This isn’t something you should have to participate in, my lord.”
“Look, I’ll go in first. I’ll cut you a path with the Avid.”
This way, I’d kill two birds with one stone: I’d get to see an enemy fortress captured up close, and I’d get to go on the offensive myself.

***

Inside a small troop carrier, the landing force’s soldiers wore tough-looking powered suits and waited anxiously to charge the enemy pirate fortress.
The intimidating commander of this unit opened up the visor of her helmet and shouted, “In a few minutes, we begin our attack on the enemy fortress! The enemy is sure to send out many fighters, just like you, so make sure you’re the ones who survive!”
The small craft had dense armor and employed stealth technology, but there was no guarantee it wouldn’t be shot down. Even if they made it safely to the asteroid, they still had to force their way into the base. The soldiers couldn’t help but be nervous.
While the commander was explaining the particulars of the mission, she received an emergency communication on her tablet. On the other end of the line was Tia, and the commander saluted her. “Do you need something, ma’am?”
“Wouldn’t have called if I didn’t. Lord Liam has declared his intent to lead the charge. Today is your lucky day; you’ll be escorted inside by Lord Liam himself.”
“Th-that’s—”
“That’s that. Hurry and position your craft behind the Avid.”
After Tia conveyed this information, she cut the communication, leaving the commander looking baffled. The woman’s shock quickly subsided, however; she’d raided a pirate gang with Liam once before—the one belonging to the infamous Goaz.
“You heard her. Lord Liam himself will be leading us into the enemy fortress. Mistakes are absolutely not allowed!”

***

Within the fortress, the pirates readied themselves to fight for their lives. They knew House Banfield showed no mercy to pirates and that their surrender had been rejected.
“Hold them back, no matter what you have to do! Don’t let them get any further!”
The big boss shouted orders to his fleet over the comm system, but one of his men turned from his monitors with a frantic report.
“Th-the enemy’s invading! Our defense systems aren’t going to be able to withstand the assault!”
The boss ordered his pirates to the affected location, then added, “Station men in every passage that leads into the fort in case their main attack is a diversion! The second any of them make their way inside, shoot them full of holes!”
How long could they hold out? If they could make the battle last a few months, maybe House Banfield would lose patience with the effort and retreat. This was all he could hope for.
We have to buy time, no matter what. There’s no other way out of this.
With their asteroid surrounded by the enemy’s fleet, there was nowhere for them to run. The pirates’ vessels were resisting the combined fleets of House Banfield and House Exner, but the invading enemies kept crushing the ships in their path and plowing onward. How much longer before the armada was beating at their door?
“Hurry and get those reinforcements in place!”
If they let even a small invading squad get through, everything would crumble. The boss frantically continued spewing orders, but…
“I-It’s not going to work… They’re going to keep coming!”
The man’s hopeless wail filled the command center.

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“Outta my waaay!”
In her white-and-blue craft, Tia thrust a thin laser blade into one of the pirates’ mobile knights and spun it around. The boosters on her back spread apart, and light blazed from their nozzles, making them look even more like the wings of some warrior angel.
When Tia sped past the enemy mobile knight, a hole opened up in its body, and the humanoid craft exploded soon after. As the white avenging angel whooshed past them, more enemy machines exploded one after another.
Catching up with a craft that had dodged one of her attacks, Tia pounced on it from behind and seized hold of it.
“Aha! Caught you!”
To the enemy, the beautiful white craft must have looked like a devil.
“S-spare me!” shouted the pirate inside the grappled mobile knight.
Inside her cockpit, Tia smiled coldly. “At least your pleading serves as some nice background noise.”

She mercilessly skewered the enemy's cockpit, and the mobile knight went still. Tia kicked the enemy aside and went searching for her next prey.
"This new craft isn't bad at all," she murmured in approval. "I quite like it."
The machine from the Third Weapons Factory was doing a fine job of mowing down all the enemies that swarmed her. It was a higher-performance craft than the one she'd piloted back when she made a name for herself as the Princess Knight.
Two former knights who had stooped to piracy attacked Tia at the same time.
"You must be the commander!"
"You've bit off more than you can chew, I'm afraid!"
The two spiky-looking, modified mobile knights thrust their swords at Tia's craft, but she repelled one enemy with her left arm and thrust her laser blade through the other's cockpit. Then she lunged after the craft she'd knocked aside, slicing its body in two with another bladed weapon that had been concealed in one of the legs of her machine.
"You're gonna have to do better than that if you want to stop me. Now, who's gonna be my next victim? Ah…that looks good."
Tia had set her sights on a pirate ship. She stepped on the pedal to accelerate forward, dodging all the attacks the ship fired to intercept her. When she reached it, she thrust her laser blade directly into the ship's bridge.
Before they even had time to scream, the men on the bridge were vaporized in an explosion. With the command center and its crew destroyed, the ship ground to a halt. Tia switched to her rifle and continued her attack. Once she'd finished the pirate ship off, sending it spiraling down into a crash on the asteroid's surface, she checked her score.
"Thirty mobile knights and six ships. Still not enough."
Even though she'd taken down so many enemies by herself, she hadn't yet slaked her thirst for battle. Besides, someone else was still outperforming her—Liam, of course.
Next to Liam's name, which was displayed in first place on the scoreboard, the numbers shifted swiftly. Tia pivoted her craft so she could watch Liam wreak havoc on the enemy. The Avid held a sword in each hand, whirling to meet and vanquish one enemy after another. It swung one of its laser blades in a bright arc, and several mobile knights in the path of the slash exploded in a chain of fiery blooms.
"Keep 'em comin'!"
Tia could hear Liam laughing loudly as his score increased. She shivered, and her cheeks flushed red. "What incredible work. I can't let myself fall behind!"
Fixing her eyes on her next prey, the Princess Knight leapt back into the battle.

***

“There you aaare!”
We’d reached what seemed to be the principal entrance to the enemy fortress on the asteroid, though it was sneakily camouflaged within the rock.
“This looks like as good a way to get in as any.”
I sliced the hatch with one of the Avid’s laser swords, and the afflicted metal turned reddish-orange and began to melt. Once it broke free, the hatch floated off into space, given that there was hardly any gravity on the asteroid. I now had a full view of what waited for me on the other side—a pirate ship with its main gun pointed right at me!
Right as the hatch broke away, the ship’s main gun spewed flames. Well, not flames, but a barrage of energy beams. The force was so great at this range that it pushed the Avid back. Still, I pressed down on the acceleration pedal, and the Avid made its way forward even against the fierce blasts. The sight of the Avid creeping ever closer probably terrified whoever was on that ship.
“That mobile knight is too strong! If you don’t do something, it’ll be right on top of us!”
The pirate ship was hooked up to the fortress by a thick cable, drawing extra power to strengthen its main gun and keep it firing continuously. This ultimately proved too much for the gun, its barrel turning red and melting away. Connected to the same system, the rest of the ship’s energy weapons began to melt or break down too, sparks flying off the metal.
When finally I reached the pirate ship in the Avid, I pressed my craft’s manipulators to the vessel’s hull. “Got you!”
At my command, several magic circles appeared behind the Avid, glowing in the air, and the missile pods that emerged from within fired at all the pirate ships and mobile knights gathered around me in the enemy hangar. The hangar filled with overlapping explosions.
Yes, I’d forced an entrance into the pirates’ base, but I wondered if I’d gone too far. The shock from all the explosions made it feel like the whole fort was already about to cave in on itself.
“This might’ve been a tad much. I’ll try to be a bit more skillful next time.”
Turning around as the fireballs subsided, I saw my accompanying mobile knights and a number of small crafts flooding into the hangar. One of my knights—notably, not Tia—sang my praises over our communication link.
“Incredible work, Lord Liam! Now we’ll begin our ground invasion of the enemy fortress!”
“They were no match for me. Where’s Tia, though?”
“Christiana is still fighting outside to secure the path for more forces.”
“Huh… Well, that’s fine, I guess.”
The entrance into the fortress was wide enough for pirate ships and mobile knights to come and go, so the Avid had passed through it with no problem. I headed deeper into the base and was soon met with another line of ships

and mechs all waiting to engage me. One of these pirate ships contacted me over an open line.
“You’re not taking one more step forward. Fire away, boys!”
The mobile knights pointed their rifles at me and three pirate ships aimed their cannons my way. They were all hooked up to the fortress with cables, as the last ship had been, so they could continuously fire stronger beams, but I didn’t want to waste time like I had earlier.
“Sorry, but I’m not gonna play along this time. Do it, Avid.”
The great shields on the Avid’s shoulders shifted forward, and the spherical energy fields they generated around me grew bigger. The pale orbs of light that enveloped the Avid spread further and further outward.
The pirates didn’t seem to understand my intentions.
“Don’t think you’ll be able to shield your allies just by expanding your barrier! That mobile knight is about to become your coffi—wh-what?”
The energy barrier was designed to block enemy fire, but as it continued to grow, it eventually started crumpling the enemy ships and mobile knights. The field expanded in a circle, creating cracks in the walls and ceiling where it pressed against them. All the pirates before me were crushed, and several more explosions rocked the fortress.
“That was kinda extreme too, huh? What should I try next?”
My soldiers behind me were unharmed, luckily, but I needed to bear in mind that the Avid was so overpowered, it couldn’t keep from going overboard. Like the Way of the Flash, it was impossible to hold back when I used it.
As I proceeded forward, the small crafts that followed behind me entered narrow branching passageways and unloaded their soldiers, who spread out to take control of the fort’s interior. I lumbered along ahead of them until I finally reached the core of the fortress: an incredibly spacious room.
Was this a space to moor pirate ships for maintenance and resupply? Only a few ships were in here now, as the majority of them had been deployed to resist our attack. There was no top or bottom to the chamber; it was a gigantic vertical tunnel with facilities fitted in the rocky walls. One of these structures was a giant metal pier jutting out from the wall, where a number of ships were docked above the deep pit below us. Honestly, this structure looked like a giant skewer of grilled meat.
A group of our small crafts followed the Avid into the vast chamber, after which the hatch through which we’d entered shut behind us, trapping us within.
“Lord Liam, stay back!”
My team of mobile knights stepped out in front of the Avid just as a slew of pirates came out from their hiding places. It was a considerable army of strangely modified, smaller-scale mobile knights.
“An ambush?”
“We’ve been waiting for you,” said the pilot who commanded this small army, and I realized he was a former knight who’d fallen to piracy. He’d be

the toughest foe yet. “In the confines of a fortress like this, smaller crafts have the mobility advantage. A monster like yours can’t fight freely!”
I guess he thought the Avid, which was extra large for a mobile knight, wouldn’t be able to maneuver very well inside the fortress. The enemy was a formidable group of nothing but small crafts, so I do think he had the right idea in general. These small mobile knights, with their rounded bodies, had been built to fight in confined spaces. Normally, this would have been an extremely troublesome trap. Normally.
Addressing my people, I said, “Well, I could beat these guys myself, but… let’s see what you folks can do.”
“Sir!”
The mobile knights in front of me all raised their operators’ preferred weapons aloft and charged. Thus, the skirmish began.
“Ha ha! Take them all down! I want every last pirate dead!”
This was a great opportunity for me to see just how well the mobile knights from the Third Weapons Factory performed.

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One of the Banfield pilots was a knight candidate. He was still young, but he’d grown out a beard to give himself a mature look as the commander of his squad. The man was thrilled to finally show off what he’d learned as a knight.
I really admire Lord Liam for charging in first and cutting his way through, but if I just stayed hidden behind him the whole time, my squadmates might think I’m slacking off.
The sight of the Avid striding forward into the enemy base had made a huge impact on Liam’s people. Even the male knights looked upon the craft with adoration, immensely proud to have a fellow like Liam as their lord.
Well, we should probably earn our keep, eh?
Being protected by their charge had been frustrating for his fighters, and the young commander was relieved that he could now take real action.
Over their communication system, he cried, “You heard Lord Liam, everyone! Let’s show our master what we can do!”
“Sir, yes, sir!” his squad members all answered at once.
The commanding knight drew a sword from its slot in his mobile knight’s shield and leapt at the closest enemy machine, slashing through it.
All of the enemy crafts gripped two submachine guns with axes beneath their muzzles. The pirates’ mobile knights were equipped for close combat and long-range attacks. They were highly maneuverable, flitting inside the strange chamber, making it hard for the knights’ mid-sized units to keep up with them. Liam’s crafts, however, were more state-of-the-art.
The young knight said to himself, “This would’ve been a real challenge for an old model, but this baby’s brand new. Time for you scum to die.”

He swung his laser sword down and sliced through the thick armor of an enemy mobile knight, tearing into its cockpit. The machine immediately stopped moving, and the commander kicked it aside to get it out of his way.
The pirates quickly rallied, sending several crafts directly at the commander, but a member of his squad gunned them down from behind him. He heard a pirate crying out in confusion over an open comm channel.
“H-how did they pierce my armor? This thing was custom-made!”
Apparently, this pirate’s craft had been specially modified with thicker armor…which had now sustained some serious damage.
The commander’s mobile knight gripped a shield in its left manipulator and aimed its pointed tip at the enemy. As he leapt at the pirate’s mobile knight, the tip of the shield glowed with a pale light, firing a beam that pierced the enemy machine. The defeated mobile knight spewed oil like a spray of blood, and the dark beads floated off into the weightless void.

The commander said to the dead man, “Our crafts are special-order too, you see. But they’re leagues ahead of yours.”
As more and more enemy mobile knights were destroyed, some of the pirates tried to flee, but House Banfield shot them down. The mass-produced units from the Third Weapons Factory were overwhelmingly more powerful than the pirates’ mod jobs.

***

The big boss watched his underlings get picked off one by one on his command center’s main monitor. House Banfield’s mobile knights were relentless as they mowed down the pirate legion. While the machines on either side were unique, it was the pilots’ abilities that made all the difference.
All the other pirates in the command center shuddered at the tremendous bloodlust of their enemies. The small crafts dispatched from House Banfield’s fleet kept pouring into the fortress, and on the outside, the Banfield fleet dominated the battlefield. With the fortress’s defense systems being destroyed one by one, they couldn’t even buy time as they’d hoped.
“Boss!” one of the pirates shouted from his station. “Enemy infantry is headed for the command center!”
The boss checked one of the security camera monitors and saw a well-equipped landing force advancing along a corridor, cutting down any pirates who tried to stop them. It was only a matter of time before they arrived at this very room.
He looked up at the ceiling and laughed fatalistically. “Ah ha ha! Perfect!”
“B-Boss?”
“We’re gonna launch some major fireworks, boys. If this is the end for us, then we’ll blow ourselves to smithereens and take House Banfield’s entire fleet with us!”
The other pirates all hung their heads in resignation. There was nowhere for them to run. If the alternative was getting caught and killed or tortured, they’d rather blow themselves up instead, especially if it meant taking their enemies down in the process.
Their boss left the command center, removing a keycard from his pocket. He proceeded down a hidden passageway and entered a room containing a huge device.
“You’ll see what happens when you try to make a fool of me. You wouldn’t have had to die if you’d only made a deal with me.”
He inserted the keycard into the hulking device and activated it. Once it started counting down, he declared, “We’re all gonna go out with a bang!”
The door to the secret chamber was shut and locked, and it couldn’t be easily opened. Their fate was in motion.
Using his tablet, he opened a communication channel to House Banfield’s fleet. “Yo! Can you hear me, Pirate-Hunter Liam?”

There was no response, but the boss continued in case they were listening. “This fortress was used by the Imperial Army several thousand years ago. They stripped the asteroid’s resources and abandoned it, but they left an impressive base behind, and we decided to use it for ourselves.” He gave the device behind him a light rap with his knuckles. “It’s a bomb—powerful enough to blow this whole thing into dust, along with anything in the vicinity. I don’t know its name, its make, or why it’s here, but I’m confident in its power.”

Documents left behind in the fortress had made it amply clear to him what would happen if the bomb were ever detonated, and the device’s readouts proved it was still perfectly functional. He didn’t know why the fortress contained such a bomb, but he was going to go down, so he wanted to go down swinging.

“Too bad for you. If you’d just left us alone, you wouldn’t have had to die today!”

As the boss concluded his taunting spiel, a child appeared on the tablet’s screen.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Hey! You’re—”

“That’s enough. Don’t say anything more. It’s pathetic trying to blow us up this late in the game. If you’re gonna go through with something like this, then why not just lure us in quietly and do it? Course, I’d still live through it, but…”

The boss snorted, thinking the child was merely putting on a brave front.

“No point in acting tough, kid—it’s over for you!”

“It’s not over for me. You, on the other hand…”

***

The guy the other pirates had been calling “Boss” in the messages we’d intercepted had obviously decided on a last desperate move. The energy readings throughout the fortress had suddenly spiked, and my people had started to worry for my safety, trying to get me to evacuate. That was when this Boss person suddenly contacted us and said he’d activate a bomb that would destroy the asteroid and the fleet that surrounded it. So this was his way of outwitting us at the end—by sacrificing himself?

“Was this the best move you could come up with? If it were me, I would’ve at least kept quiet about the bomb. Nah, it’s already over if you’ve been cornered so badly that your only choice is to blow yourself up.”

If you got into a situation like that, it was checkmate. A real villain would’ve figured something out before things reached this point.

Nias, who’d been analyzing the situation with the energy spike, appeared on a monitor in my cockpit.

“Lord Liam, we’re finished with the analysis. You can safely destroy the device before it completes the chain reaction that was set in motion. But

please, get it done immediately, because if that thing does overload it will be like a miniature supernova!”
I guess they don’t call them experts for nothing.
“Send me the data on the device’s exact location.”
“Already sent to your targeting screen.”
“Wow… You actually *are* capable, after all.”
“Hey! I’ve always been capable!”
Nias puffed out her cheeks and cut off the communication before I could reply. You know, I’d have used you to test my Way of the Flash skills by now if you were anyone else!
“Oh, whatever. Let’s finish this, Avid.”
The Avid’s eyes flashed. As I directed the mobile knight toward the location Nias had marked on my targeting screen, a large magic circle materialized behind my craft. A cannon large enough to serve as a battleship’s main gun emerged from within. The Avid reached behind with its left hand, gripped this bulky weapon, and drew it out of the magic portal with a flare of light. This weapon was a product of both science and magic, so it was potent but unstable. While it was difficult to fire at a moving enemy, the cannon was supposed to be highly effective at destroying a fixed target. I’d never used it up until now because it was so challenging to wield.
An electronic voice sounded inside the cockpit. “Coordinates and range confirmed. Target locked. System power at maximum. Weapon ready for firing.”
The Avid held the gigantic cannon at the ready, planted its feet, and aimed at a section of corridor wall. On the other side was the chamber where the boss was hiding.
“Sorry, but you’re the only one who’s gonna be turning into dust today.”
I pulled the trigger on the cannon’s main grip, and a series of small magic circles—hundreds of them, actually—appeared down the length of the gun’s barrel, coalescing into one huge magic ring. Then, this blazing wheel of light rushed away from the gun’s barrel, propelled into the wall, and vanished.
But as I lowered the cannon, it all seemed a bit anticlimactic. In firing the gun, there’d been no bang, no recoil, and now I saw there wasn’t even a physical hole punched through the rock wall. Another wave of magic cooled it down right away before it could overheat. Kind of boring, really, like I hadn’t even fired a weapon at all. Until…

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The big boss trembled in fear as he stood in front of the self-destruct device, watching the countdown slowly advance toward his doom. He talked to himself with bravado to keep his fear from turning into panic. It wasn’t to show to anyone else, but just to fool himself.

“I’ll blast all of them to atoms. House Banfield’s fleet *and* that so-called Pirate-Hunter Liam! And if I erase his name from history, maybe mine will remain, huh?”

Just then, however, the big boss looked up to see a huge magic circle on the wall above his head. A cylindrical metal object emerged from the center of the circle, flying straight toward him.

By the time the boss realized what was happening, there was no time to flee. The metal projectile fell directly onto him, crushing him before he could even scream.

And before the pirate boss’s secret weapon could complete its cycle and explode, the shell from Liam’s own secret weapon exploded instead, blowing apart everything in the room.

Chapter 11:
A Gift from the Past

"TIME TO HUNT for treasure!"

I donned my space helmet, exited the Avid, and stood in front of the fortress entrance with my arms crossed. Then I called the landing force to me, hoping for them to accompany me on my treasure hunt.

"Lord Liam, if I may be permitted to speak?" a female officer piped up.

"You may."

"Appreciated, sir! We haven't finished clearing the base of enemies. I believe hunting for treasure at this stage is too dangerous!"

"It's only fun *because* there are rooms you haven't checked yet! It'd be boring if I had to wait until you guys had checked everything out for me." Wasn't it my right as a noble to reap the rewards of war with my soldiers in tow?

"All right, no further questions? Then let's go clear this pirate base of treasure!"

I strode forward excitedly, and my soldiers chased after me, shouting, "Lord Liam, please wait!" Their nervousness just made it more fun.

On foot, we made our way through the ill-kept fortress. It was messy after the battle, but these guys didn't seem like they'd have been neat even in the best of times. There was garbage everywhere.

"Sure doesn't *seem* like there's much treasure to be found here," I muttered.

"If only it were so easy to find. Pirates do tend to hide their treasure, you know," the female officer replied in a somewhat exasperated tone.

One of my soldiers, who had been using a detection device, reported, "Lord Liam! We've found a safe!"

In some pirate's quarters was a small safe with a few rolls of banknotes inside.

"This must be someone's personal stash."

We didn't find anything else of interest, so I just collected it and moved on. We'd already found a few of these little treats, but nothing close to what I was really hankering for. We combed the base for a few more hours after that, but I never found anything good.

"Dammit, what a dud!"

I'd gotten my hopes up, thinking this fortress would be chock-full of treasure, yet we hadn't uncovered a single reward worthy of the endeavor. That soldier with a detection device suddenly noticed something unusual on his scan. "Hmm? There's a secret passage here."

With my sword, I sliced into the wall that concealed the passageway to reveal a door behind it. This place had been pretty thoroughly hidden, so I felt renewed hope.

“There’s something back here for sure.”
I headed down the passageway, and my soldiers hurried after me. Once I’d traveled far enough, I began to make out something in the darkness.
“What’s this? A theater?”
The chamber I emerged into looked like a theater attended by an audience of robots, but the robots were all shut down. Or were they mannequins? Statues? I brazenly stepped forward, but my soldiers proceeded with the utmost caution, focused on keeping me safe.
“Please stay back, Lord Liam.”
I found their mothering attitude irritating. We were finally in a place where there might be some treasure, but they wouldn’t stop getting in my way. I couldn’t just bite their heads off, though; they were only doing their job.
“You think you’d be able to deal with anything I can’t handle? I need to go in first.”
“B-but it’s too dangerous, sir!”
“So what?”
I ignored them and continued forward. It was an extravagant, spacious theater, but its beauty was spoiled by what I saw on its wide stage. Numerous statues stood upon it, like a group of figures some crazed artist had chiseled out of one huge rock. There was definitely something strange about them. When I drew closer to inspect the statues, I found that their faces wore twisted expressions of anguish. Some of them had masks on, but with or without masks, the expressions of pain were consistent.
“This is sick,” one of my soldiers muttered. “They’re so realistic, it’s hard to look at them.”
He was exactly right. Each statue was so incredibly detailed, they might spring to life at any moment. The sight of them all frozen while writhing in agony was terrifying.
I also felt a strange presence. My senses, honed from my training in the Way of the Flash, told me that there were people in this room besides my landing party. I sensed life from the statues that filled the seats and stage.
“I want these statues investigated right now. Call in some doctors…and people who specialize in curses too.”
My soldiers quickly made the arrangements without questioning my orders. When the doctors arrived and performed a quick examination, they told me exactly what I’d been expecting.
What we’d thought were statues were all, in fact, petrified human beings.

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One of the soldiers watched as the petrified people were carried one by one out of the theater. As part of the landing force, he wore a powered suit, but he’d removed his helmet. His unit was charged with guarding the workers, but he’d just gone on break, so he was chatting with a colleague.

“Lord Liam sure is a strange one. It’ll probably cost a fortune to restore so many petrified people.”
He sat down in one of the theater’s seats, and his colleague sat down next to him.
“He hasn’t changed at all. I was a little worried his noble training would be a bad influence on him, but I guess I didn’t need to worry.”
Noble children often returned from their training with some changes in character, and the host family’s influence wasn’t always good. The soldiers were all relieved to find that Liam hadn’t been thus affected, but they were still a little exasperated with him.
“I wish he’d stop charging ahead of us on these treasure hunts, though. It’s nerve-racking watching him stroll around in a pirate base. There could be traps around every corner.”
“You said it. There’s no point in us guarding him if he’s going to act so brash.”
For all their talk of how bothered they were by Liam’s behavior, both soldiers were smiling with sunny faces. They wished Liam wouldn’t be so bold, but they were happy to see that he was the same as ever.

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Once my treasure hunt was over, I returned to the Vár, where I was greeted by my crew. When I stepped out of the Avid, they all applauded as if they’d planned it in advance. That put me in a pleasant mood.
The first to approach me was Tia. “Another brilliant performance, Lord Liam. My heart soars to witness your valiant deeds.”
“Oh, yeah? Lucky you.”
“Yes, sir!”
Good job with the boot-licking, soldier.
Anyway, it was only natural that I’d performed brilliantly. Anyone would in a monstrous mobile knight like the Avid. Sure, it was a little tough to pilot, but that was all there was to it. Still, these guys wouldn’t be satisfied unless they hyped me up.
Obviously, they only heaped me with generous praise for doing something so simple because of my status. Were I just some random pilot, they would never compliment me so ardently. In fact, they’d probably tell me to work harder, or they’d be green with envy. After all, I just ran rampant whenever I felt like it, and when I didn’t want to sortie, I just didn’t. Even so, my people had nothing but kind words for me. That was what authority got you!

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Tia checked the scoreboard once more. She was far above the third-place mobile knight, but she still hadn’t totaled anywhere near Liam, who was sitting comfortably in first place. Their respective tallies surprised her.

“I can’t believe a machine like his could produce these kinds of numbers.”
From Tia’s perspective, the Avid seemed like an incredibly difficult machine to pilot. The controls themselves were difficult to operate, but the craft was also so high-spec that any normal pilot would have thrown it around wildly, unable to coordinate the humanoid machine.
Several mechanics chatted as they performed light maintenance on the Avid.
“Lord Liam was totally born into the wrong family if he can tame a beast like this, don’t you think?”
“Yeah, he’d be a top ace in the Empire if he’d been born to a family of knights.”
“This joint’s had about all it can take. Since Engineering Captain Nias is on board, let’s have her take a look at it.”
Far from being bucked around by the machine, Liam had mastered its power. He was incredible enough as a lord, but as a knight, he was the best of the best. Tia was absolutely infatuated with him.

***

After the battle, a large transport ship belonging to the Henfrey Company arrived at the fortress asteroid. They were there to resupply House Banfield’s fleet and to purchase whatever treasure Liam had found.
One of the Banfield ships had released an artificial gravity device near the fortress to attract debris generated by the battle. The fragments whirled around this device in a slow circle, and a number of workers in one-man pods went through it to see if any of it was useful.
Thomas gazed out at the view from a waiting room aboard this House Banfield ship and nodded, impressed. He’s cleaning up his environment thoroughly as always. Most nobles would simply leave a battlefield filled with wreckage, but Lord Liam never cuts corners. I needn’t have worried his time away would corrupt him.
As he mentally praised Liam for doing what was only natural, a military man sporting a colonel’s insignia entered the room.
“Thank you for your patience, Mr. Henfrey.”
“Oh, I wasn’t waiting long. Is Lord Liam on his way to his domain?”
“No, he’s left to escort his friends to their homes first. I believe he should be in Baron Exner’s domain just about now.”
Seated across from the colonel at a long table, Thomas launched into the details of their meeting. He confirmed the delivery of their supplies and their method of payment.
Once the discussion ended, the colonel asked Thomas a solemn question.
“By the way, I don’t suppose you’ve heard any rumors as a businessman about Viscount Razel having a connection to pirates, have you?”

Thomas frowned. “I have no proof, but the merchants do talk. The viscount’s rumored to have engaged in all sorts of suspicious activities. Why do you ask?”
The colonel gave Thomas a penetrating look. The merchant squirmed a little, sensing the colonel suspected him of involvement, but the colonel seemed to realize he was unsettling him and quickly apologized.
“Sorry. The Henfrey Company’s done some business with House Razel, so we were just wondering if you intended to maintain your relationship with them.”
“We had to part ways with House Razel, unfortunately. We were giving them rather good deals because of Lord Liam’s relationship with them too.”
Thomas had been more than displeased to learn of Liam’s treatment at the hands of House Razel. Liam had been quite the invaluable patron to Thomas, after all.
Thomas asked, “By the way, have you received any communications from House Razel concerning the battle with those pirates?”
The ambush had taken place at the farthest reaches of the viscount’s domain, so Thomas was curious as to whether Viscount Razel had anything to say on the matter.
“Not much,” the colonel replied, clearly disgusted. “He did send us his highest compliments on our victory, but it seems he wants to feign innocence and pretend he’s got nothing to do with the pirate gang.”
“You’re not going to challenge him?”
“We wanted to do just that, but Lord Liam has ordered us not to.”
“He did?!” Thomas couldn’t understand why Liam would want to overlook such obvious lies.
With a wry smile, the colonel explained the boy’s reasoning. “He’d rather forget about House Razel entirely and focus on deepening his ties with House Exner instead.”
Thomas stroked his double chin and mused, “He assisted that house a great deal in this recent pirate incident too.”
I don’t think there’s all that much merit in a relationship with Baron Exner’s house, but maybe Lord Liam has some ulterior motive.
The colonel shrugged, just as confused. “We can’t always comprehend the way Lord Liam does things. Some of my more crass compatriots have laughed and suggested that maybe he just wants to show off to a good friend of his.”
Thomas couldn’t help but laugh at this theory. “I’m sure that’s not it.”
The colonel offered a chuckle of his own. “I’m sure you’re right. These rumors really tend to get out of hand, don’t they?”

***

After capturing the fortress, I arrived on House Exner’s home planet. Well, I say home planet, but the Exners were only in possession of this one planet,

and their mansion was the same one the magistrate who'd previously overseen the planet had used.
Kurt escorted Eila and me to the mansion, but he seemed embarrassed about it. "I know it's small, so please bear with me."
Eila smiled. "It's fine. Even if it's small, this is plenty."
"I'm glad you feel that way."
As I listened to their conversation, I suppressed my bewilderment.
What's he saying? This place is bigger than the temporary mansion I lived in while I was having my new mansion built. I thought my temporary place was big enough already, but this mansion is even bigger! Do people in this world measure buildings compared to the Tokyo Dome?!
The building was plenty large, and could be comfortably lived in, but Kurt still looked apologetic.
"I'm sorry. I bet you were picturing something more like Viscount Razel's mansion, but this is all I've got."
"Huh? Oh…yeah."
I wasn't sure how to respond. Sure, Viscount Razel's mansion had been huge, but come on; if a count like me had been happy with a smaller house than this, maybe Kurt was being a little too ostentatious as a mere baron?
I thought House Exner was supposed to be poor. These guys really are evil lords. They were just using that "repurposing the magistrate's mansion" excuse as a way to live in luxury!
That insanely oversized new mansion I'd built really was over the top. Now I was sure of it. I'd been kind of freaked out when Amagi and Brian said we could have made it even bigger. I was always having to adjust my perceptions in this world, even now.
One of House Exner's servants said, "Lord Kurt, the baths are ready for you."
"All right. Show Liam the way first, would you?"
"Very well. Please come this way, Lord Banfield."
I was suddenly swarmed by female servants, and I pulled back in surprise. Huh? He has servants wash him? Don't you get cleaner if you just let a machine do it? I've never been washed by anything but a maid robot. Before that, I just did it myself, and that was totally fine.
I looked at Kurt. "W-we bathed in groups at House Razel, so why don't you come too?"
For some reason, Kurt was flustered by my invitation. "You sure?"
"It's your house, isn't it?"
Thus, Kurt and I decided to take a bath together, but that left Eila all on her lonesome. I turned to her and said, "Sorry, we can chat later."
Though we'd be leaving Eila by herself, she just smiled as usual and waved at us. *Is this girl really a noble? She's so friendly and nice.*
"It's fine, it's fine. Go deepen your bonds of masculine friendship."
"Uh, thanks."

Something about the gaze Eila directed our way seemed heated to me. That's weird. I thought she was just looking at Kurt, but she's looking my way too.

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After Liam and Kurt left, Eila followed at a safe distance and arrived at a quiet hallway near the baths, where she hid in the shadows behind a vending machine.
She took out her tablet and tapped away at it.
"I'd better be careful; it's an old mansion, but they've still got security. If I could just sneak *one* little drone in there… Aha! Ooh-hoo-hoo!"
Eila blushed when she saw the image being sent by the marble-sized floating drone to her tablet. On her screen were the naked bodies of Kurt and Liam, sitting in the bath. The drone was relaying audio too.
"You know, I think you've grown since we started our training, Kurt."
"Oh, really?"
They were chatting in the bath, and close together too. When she saw this, Eila couldn't contain her excitement.
"Squeee! You two are so close… You're gonna overload my fantasies if you keep this up!"
As she watched Liam and Kurt converse in the bath, Eila pressed a hand to her beet-red cheek.
"Oh, this is so nice. I just knew it the moment I saw them… I've got a sixth sense for these things. These two are the ultimate pairing!"
Eila covered her mouth with her hand. Maybe she'd gotten a little *too* excited. She could still hear the boys' conversation through the drone.
"Hey, cut that out, Liam."
"Aw, what's the harm? We're both boys."
Their conversation was being distorted inside Eila's feverish head. She clenched her fist triumphantly as she took in the two boys' happy faces.
"Aaah! I knew I was right to back Liam. I can fight for another hundred years with this! How could it *not* be LiaKur?"
"LiaKur"—in other words, Liam and Kurt. Eila was the sort of girl who adored boy-boy romance pairings, *especially* the particular pairing of Liam and Kurt. In her opinion, Liam had to be the dominant one—hence his name going first—and suggesting otherwise was ludicrous.
"Those idiots at House Razel are insane, pushing the idea of KurLia. LiaKur is where it's really at! Hmm, but maybe it'd be nice if Kurt got forceful every once in a while… No, no, that wouldn't work. LiaKur is the only option!"
From a distance, a dog watched Eila, who might as well have had hearts for eyes. The dog seemed to ponder this sight for a moment, then decided to leave the girl alone. It pattered off, glancing back at her a few times as if it

were unsure whether it really should leave her be, and eventually disappeared.
Eila hadn’t noticed the dog, continuing to craft all sorts of headcanons while listening to the conversation between the two boys in the bath.

“KurLia is totally out of the question! If you actually look at their relationship, you can’t imagine a pompous guy like Liam being the submissive one. It’s so simplistic! Yeah, Kurt was prickly in the beginning, but Liam gave him a change of heart. Heh heh, that has such a nice ring to it. Man, those KurLia people just don’t get it; they have no understanding of pairing at all. I wish they’d think a little harder about what those two are really like!”
The more excited she got, the faster Eila’s dialogue with herself became.
“If they’d watched over them all this time, like I have, they’d awaken to their ignorance. Kurt topping Liam? Yeah, that makes for a nice picture too, but… Argh! N-no, Eila! Bad girl! You’re on the right side of history with the LiaKur faction!”

***

Three months. It took three months from when I left House Razel’s domain to when I returned to my home planet. After destroying the pirates who’d been harassing Baron Exner’s domain and capturing their fortress, I’d stayed for a while at his mansion and availed myself of his hospitality. I then delivered Eila to her domain, and before I knew it, all that time had passed.
Having returned to my mansion at last, I sat down on a couch to tolerate a lecture from Brian. Actually, it was more like a series of high-strung complaints. Had it come from anyone other than Brian, I’d have made that guy a smear on my blade.
“We had so many parties and ceremonies prepared for you upon your return from your training! Why have you canceled them all? You’re going to make me cry!”
I didn’t mind being greeted with, “We’re so glad to have you home from House Razel! Congrats! Good job!” but if I let them take things too far, it would go from praise to mockery. To put it in terms of my past life, I felt like a child who’d stayed overnight at a friend’s house for the first time and come back safely.
“Parties and ceremonies that go on for a whole month are a bit much. You just need to let my subjects know I’m home now.”
While we talked, Brian cradled the bonsai I’d taken back from House Razel. He looked a little dejected at its return.
“What a shame they didn’t take any interest in my bonsai. I don’t mind having it back, but it *did* win a contest…”
Actually, they’d been about to throw it away, but I decided not to tell him that part.
“Well, none of them had an eye for value.”
“Anyway, did you learn anything interesting from House Razel during your training, Master Liam?” Brian asked timidly, and I decided to tell him the bare truth.
“Nope, nothing.”

“Nothing, sir?”
“Not one experience served as any sort of helpful future reference. I guess it was a good example of what *not* to do, though. If Kurt and Eila hadn’t been there, the whole three years would have been a waste.”
And I think Baron Exner will prove to be a nice evil lord friend. I managed to meet some nice people, so I considered the overall stay all right in the end.
For some reason, Brian was nodding, looking rather pleased. “I’m so glad to see you haven’t changed, Master Liam.”
“Hmph.”
I had no clue as to why Brian was grinning so happily at a villain like me.

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It was all well and good that my training had ended and that I’d returned to my mansion, but thanks to the more relaxed life I’d led in House Razel’s domain, my normal schedule felt a little intense.
Amagi, acting as my secretary, announced, “It is six minutes past the scheduled end time. Your duties for the day are concluded.”
I leaned back in my chair and let out a deep sigh. Finally, I’d reached the end of another workday. It was really sinking in how much I’d let myself go. For one thing, I was a lot less efficient at my paperwork.
“I’ll have to retrain myself before I head off to school.”
“Considering the time between now and then, you will have to enter the education capsule again soon. We only have about a year to work with.”
“Training at House Razel is totally useless. I can’t believe they’re so popular. Hmm.”
Something dawned on me. If their approach was all it took to become a popular location for training, then maybe I should start accepting noble kids for training at House Banfield. All you had to do was take them in, house them, and then leave them alone. If I prepared housing and hired some additional staff, noble families would come flocking to me. As a nice little bonus, I’d make ties with promising young evildoers. It put me in a good mood thinking of nobles sending heaps of money and resources my way to babysit their children for a while.
“All right! Amagi, House Banfield’s going to start taking in noble kids for training too! There’s nothing Viscount Razel can do that I can’t, right?”
“Unfortunately, that will not be possible.”
“Why not?” I asked, taken aback.
In her usual monotone, Amagi explained, “From your comments, I presume you intend to take in children of nobles ranked baron or higher, but due to the poor reputation House Banfield has long suffered in noble society, it seems unlikely to me that important nobles would entrust their children to us.”

My lofty plans had already been foiled by the poor legacy my grandfather and father had saddled me with. Those two were pests who'd done nothing but get in my way. I wished they'd been more helpful to me, like the Guide.
"We'll take in families from the backwaters, then. Make the preparations."
"Very well, then. Incidentally, Master…"
"What is it?"
"We have received a communication from the Seventh Weapons Factory regarding the delivery of a fortress-class ship. Did you order military assets without consulting me again?"
The monstrosity I'd bought on a whim after an exciting glimpse at Nias's… humble underwear? Well, I had completely forgotten about that.
Amagi was expressionless, but I could tell she was mad. "You purchased some other vessels as well, correct? Our plans will have to be readjusted again."
I hurriedly made an excuse for myself. "Um, well, I'll pass them on to other houses that are in trouble so they can build up their military strength and become our allies. Yeah, that's what I bought them for."
"Buying them as gifts is even worse. Houses that have become vassals of House Banfield will keep requesting resources indefinitely if you just hand them out. I cannot approve of that."
It would be pretty ballsy of anyone to try to exploit me. I liked the people who sucked up to me, and I couldn't stand anyone looking down on me. If that happened, I'd make sure those guys got what was coming to them someday, but right now, I needed to appease Amagi.
"We'll rent them out, then. Over time, we'll recover our expenses plus some interest. That's fine, right?" The subscription model! There shouldn't be any problem with that, right?
"I will consider that acceptable. However, *please* notify me in advance next time."
"Sure. You bet."
I was relieved that the danger had passed, and Amagi brought up the next topic on our agenda.

“Master, we have also received a report on the petrified people you found in the pirate fortress. We have not been able to uncover any of their identities. However, we do know that it was not a natural process. These people were transformed by a curse…*and* a blessing.”
My people had counted several hundred victims, but it seemed petrification wasn’t the only thing that had been done to them.
“A blessing? Even though their faces were frozen in despair?”
“The blessing was to maintain their sanity, but the petrification spell cast upon them was such that they have maintained their sense of awareness. It must be a living hell for these people.”
Petrified but forced to remain aware and sane. That *did* sound like hell.
“I wonder what they did to warrant that.”
“Our only option is to ask them. What would you like to do?”
Those people had experienced true torment. I’d been through hell in my past life too, so I figured I might as well save them from theirs. If we discovered that they were dangerous people likely to oppose me, I could just have them killed.
“Save them all.”
“As you wish, Master.”

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Brian had come to the mansion’s communication room and was currently connected to Serena on the Imperial Home Planet. They’d promised to talk about how things had turned out.
“He said Viscount Razel was an example of what not to do?”
“Yes. Thankfully, Master Liam is the same as he was before leaving for his training. No, actually, I believe he has grown for the better. I’m immensely relieved to find that things worked out nicely.”
On the monitor, Serena looked pensive on the monitor, as though she was skeptical. “He really hasn’t changed in a negative way? And House Banfield has severed ties with Viscount Razel?”
“Of course! I was enraged to hear about Master Liam’s treatment at the hands of the viscount. We will never be associating with that house again!”
Serena looked relieved to hear this. She gave a little sigh, then told Brian about the situation on the Imperial Home Planet. *“Well, that’s good, then. Here, they’ve decided to dispatch investigators to House Razel.”*
“Have they now?”
“The viscount’s gone too far. They can’t be trusted to offer future nobles proper training. From here on out, House Razel will be on the decline.”
Brian lamented his ineptitude. “I am embarrassed to say that I sent Master Liam to such a house for training. It is too late for him to redo it now, and Master Liam would never agree to that anyway.”
“Redo his training, you say? Brian, I’ve got a proposition for you.”

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On the Imperial Home Planet, immediately after ending her call with Brian, Serena used the comm system to contact someone else.
When the call was picked up, the monitor displayed the prime minister of the Empire.
“Hello, Serena. I was waiting for your report.”
“According to Brian Beaumont, Count Banfield remarked that Viscount Razel offered a perfect example of what *not* to be like as a noble. He didn’t take to Viscount Razel’s methods at all.”
“If that’s true, then we’re very fortunate.”
Serena went on to recount her conversation with Brian in greater detail. She had been using Brian to extract information ever since they’d reconnected.
“From what I hear, Lord Liam appears to be the ideal Imperial noble.”
“Careful now. You can’t just believe everything you hear, can you?”
The prime minister had high hopes for Liam, so the boy’s assignment to House Razel had worried him. He didn’t want the young count to start thinking in ways that were disadvantageous for the Empire.
“I’d like to see Count Banfield whip the outskirts into shape for us. There are already too many fools out there who don’t understand how things work. We can’t be losing our decent nobility to unscrupulous behavior.”
“Didn’t it only get this bad with Viscount Razel because you left him to his own devices?” Serena spoke brazenly despite the difference in their status, but the prime minister didn’t condemn her for that. In fact, he was repentant.
“Harsh as ever, Serena. Anyway, we’ve got him under investigation now, haven’t we? It should serve as an example to others.”
“Just a little bit late.”
“There are so many idiots out there, it’s hard to deal with them all. Anyway, Count Banfield is another issue. He’s amassed quite a bit of power now. I’ve been wanting to send someone to observe him for some time. Someone talented. Do you know any good candidates, Serena?”
“I’m partial to my own family, but my grandkids are all occupied. The great-grandkids are pretty busy too. I don’t think anyone younger than that would be able to handle Count Banfield. Why don’t I go myself?”
“Are you really up for that?”
“Just leave it to me. If Count Banfield is a loyal retainer to the Empire, I’ll provide all the assistance he needs. And if he proves a disloyal mutt, I’ll make sure he rots from the inside out.”
“Then as you say, I’ll leave this mission to you.”
And so a trusted agent of the prime minister was dispatched to Liam’s side.

Chapter 12:
A Pure and Just Evil Lord

ONE DAY, Brian introduced me to someone. She was tall, thin, and elderly, which was rare for this world. She must have been so old that the anti-aging technology had no effect anymore.
“My name is Serena. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”
The old woman had at one time been the head maid at the Imperial palace. “Head maid” might not sound all that impressive, but palace staff were already elite in their own right, so I didn’t take it lightly. Plus, if she’d been in a leadership position on top of that, it meant that she was an especially capable individual. I was impressed that a person like that would want to work for me, but I did have my questions.
“I can’t help but find it kind of odd. You could be spending the rest of your days in comfort on the Capital Planet, so what are you doing looking for work out here in the sticks?”
When I asked this, Brian wiped a few beads of sweat from his brow. He gave Serena a nervous look, but the woman in question just calmly explained herself.
“I tried retirement, but it’s hard for me not having any work to do. There would be no place for me if I returned to the palace now, so I figured I should lend my skills to someone else who might benefit from them. I am very grateful to you for taking me on, Count Banfield.”
I’d tried to provoke her a little, but she maintained her professional attitude. Was she just a workaholic? Well, if you’d been working for hundreds of years, maybe it *would* be hard to switch to a life of idleness.
“Before becoming the palace’s head maid, Serena was an instructor,” Brian told me. “She provided strict instruction to young nobles. I believe she is precisely the sort of person you’re looking to hire.”
Since I wanted to take in young nobles for training, it did seem like a wise move to hire her. If she was certain she wanted to work for me, then I didn’t see any reason to decline.
“We’ve decided to train young nobles here too, so I’ll be expecting a lot from you.”
“Thank you very much, Lord Liam.” Serena curtsied gracefully. Despite having retired, she didn’t seem out of practice at all.
Well, looks like I’ve acquired a real asset here, thanks to Brian!

***

“We’re increasing taxes,” I told Amagi.
“Sir?”

I'd finally decided my long preparations were complete and that it was time for me to act like an evil lord in earnest.
"I want to take a page from Baron Exner's book. That man's really something. He's an amateur ruler, but he's really got a villainous spirit, bleeding his subjects dry. His son, Kurt, is a little green, but he's definitely got the makings of an evil lord too."
I'd determined that I would start with the basics and increase taxes as an evil lord should. It'd be hard for my people, but what did I care? It wouldn't be hard for me!
"Yep, this is it! Time for a major increase!"
I was certain Amagi would disagree with my proposal, but just this once, I had no intention of budging. No matter how Amagi or Brian might protest, I was going through with this.
After considering my words for a moment, however, Amagi simply agreed.
"I would say it is about that time. It should not be a problem."
"Huh? It won't?"
"No. You are exactly right, Master."
"I am, aren't I? I can just hear the people now, crying out in misery! It's time to give these fools who worship me as a wise ruler a little taste of reality! But…they won't misunderstand me this time, will they?"
I had no idea why, but many of my subjects considered me a wise and just ruler. They'd probably go on misunderstanding me no matter what I did.
"I suppose idiots like that will continue to praise my name long after I've betrayed their trust."
While I contemplated these matters, grinning to myself, Amagi cut in with a pragmatic question. "Master, how exactly would you like to go about this increase?"
"I'll leave the particulars to you, but just make sure to get as much out of them as you can!"
"So you do not have a particular use for this money in mind?"
"Of course not. I'm only doing it because I feel like it!"
What a villain. Even the corrupt politicians of my previous life weren't as bad as me.
The next day, we announced that we'd be raising taxes starting next year. As expected, my whole domain went into an uproar.
Starting from now, I'll really get to show my stuff! Tremble in fear, my little subjects!

***

In House Banfield's domain, there was a certain single-family house with a well-groomed yard. The head of the household was an overweight, middle-aged man with a thin mustache. Upon leaving his house for his commute to work, this man saw one of his family members rushing down the sidewalk toward him.

“Hey, wait a minute! I’ve got something to tell you!”
“What’s the matter? I’m in a rush to get to work.”
The man was slightly annoyed at the prospect of being late, but his relative paid no mind to that and excitedly told him the news.
“Just look at this!” The relative manipulated his tablet and showed the first man an announcement from the government. It stated that taxes would be raised beginning next year.
“Next year?” said the man with the mustache, surprised by the news.
The announcement came with Liam’s name attached, so it was definitely authentic. He trembled as he went over the contents of the article. No disappointment came to his face, however. On the contrary, he was deeply moved.
“Is this true?”
“There’s no doubt about it—it’s official. There’s a huge tax hike coming!”
The two were thrilled about the news.
“To think I can quit my rotten job! Are they already recruiting?”
“The Third Corps is the closest, but they’re mostly recruiting researchers and teachers. It’s the Fourth Corps I want to get into. You coming?”
“Of course I am! If this goes well, we’ll be totally independent over there, and we won’t have to worry about working for others.”
What were these two so excited about? What was it they discussed so happily? Liam himself had likely forgotten about this project during his noble training, but House Banfield had begun settling a pioneer planet. Development on their home world had reached a comfortable level, so they were beginning to reach out to colonize other worlds.
Yet settling pioneer planets was a complex endeavor. There had to be a thorough investigation of a prospective planet’s environment to determine whether it was habitable and what people would need to live there. The early stages of settlement involved a lot of hard work, which was why many people didn’t care to migrate to new planets. They knew things wouldn’t be ready for them right away, and they wouldn’t be able to live comfortably. In some territories, nobles forced their subjects to relocate, then basically left them to fend for themselves. In this tax hike announcement, however, House Banfield explained that the revenue would be used to fund the settlement of their pioneer planet. In other words, it was an investment. To his subjects, Liam the wise ruler had returned from his training with fresh and exciting ideas, ready to embark on a great project.
“I figured Lord Liam would do something interesting when he got back from his training, but I didn’t expect it’d be this. The new planet is going to do even better than this one.”
“You can always trust Lord Liam to do just what he says he will. So let’s make names for ourselves on this new planet, you and I!”
“Yeah!”
Liam’s many achievements had filled his subjects with hope and anticipation, and this was no exception.

“How much is the tax increase going to be, anyway?”
“Well, it’s high, but it still won’t be as bad as it used to be. Probably about this much?” The man’s relative made some swift calculations on his tablet.
“Y’know, it used to be really bad. Taxes have almost felt *too* low until now.”
The new tax rate wouldn’t be unbearable to these people, who were familiar with how horrible life had been in House Banfield’s domain under the corrupt rule of its past two leaders. Naturally, there would be some grumbling, but to the people who’d been considering relocating to the new frontier planet, this was wonderful news.
“Once you’re done with work, let’s go sign up for the relocation group.”
“Yeah…and after that, we can hit the bar!”
Ecstatic, the two men agreed to meet for a celebratory drink that evening.

***

After we announced the increase in taxes, I watched the news, eager to see the reaction to it. When I tuned in, an expert was passionately defending my announcement.
“The purpose of this tax increase is to fund the settling of a frontier planet. I’m sure there will be complaints, but if you look at it as an investment, it’s not a bad move at all.”
A commentator argued with the expert. “But shouldn’t taxes be used for more proper purposes?”
“Developing a frontier planet is a proper purpose. If you look at the long term, you’ll see the benefits.”
“But won’t this just be a burden on everyone but the settlers?”
No citizen should be happy about a steep tax increase. If this were the democracy of my past life, the whole government would probably be voted out. Good thing it wasn’t!
As heated discussion of my policies went on, the commentator had gripes about my plan to rent out battleships too.
“I just don’t see the point in buying military ships only to rent them out to other domains.”
This commentator was always complaining about one thing or another. Then, another commentator or the moderator would jump in to counter the argument. The routine all felt scripted to me, with the commentator an especially annoying actor.
The expert argued, “Oh, can it already! I’ve been explaining the costs to you this whole time! It’s cheaper to rent out ships than send our whole army to assist other domains!”
“But why should we get involved in their problems at all?”
“Were you even listening to me? Territory means nothing to pirates! If they establish a base in another domain, it will become House Banfield’s problem too!”

Maybe this “expert” was just an actor too. It amused me to no end that the viewership could be fooled by TV theater like this.
While I watched the program on my large monitor, Amagi approached and began preparing tea for me. “You seem to be enjoying yourself, Master.”
“I am. It’s hilarious to me that people believe this program and think I’m a wise ruler.”
This kind of entertainment was all it took for dimwitted people to believe that what I was doing wasn’t for my best interests, but for the future of my subjects.
For some reason, Amagi seemed exasperated with me as she prepared my tea. “However, it is true that you ensure your own domain’s protection by renting out your ships, and it is also true that you are using the increased taxes to develop a frontier planet.”
“Is it?”
My only aim was to increase taxes and harass my subjects; I hadn’t really planned on using the money for anything specific. If I really wanted to fund some special project, I could’ve just used the alchemy box.
I took a teacup from Amagi and sipped it with my pinky raised. “Tea really tastes best when you drink it while watching your subjects struggle.”
The look Amagi gave me seemed somehow gentle, as if she were looking at something cute. “As long as you are enjoying yourself, Master.”
The program had moved on to discussing new trends.
The host said, “In this segment, we’ll be discussing the new hairstyles that are popular with our young people.”
“The things young people come up with never fail to surprise me. I would never have thought a hairstyle like this could become popular,” one commentator remarked.
I was curious what the hairstyle in question looked like, since the commentators on the show were laughing about it already.
“This is the popular ‘tornado style,’” the host announced, and a female model entered the studio.
When I saw the model, I spat out my tea. The hairstyle involved taking long hair and coiling it up atop the head. If you wanted to put it nicely, it looked like a swirl of soft-serve ice cream. If you wanted to be blunt, well…
Amagi began mopping up the droplets of tea.
I clung to her. “A-Amagiii!”
“Yes, Master?”
“Is this hairstyle actually popular? Are there really a bunch of swirly-headed people walking around in my domain right now? It’s not true, is it? Tell me it’s not true!”
I pointed at the monitor, and Amagi averted her gaze. “It is considered too silly to be worn inside the mansion, so you have not been exposed to it.”
“This, really?! Of all the hairstyles people could be into, *this* is what’s popular?!”

Dammit! My good mood's ruined! Is this how my subjects are getting back at me for the tax hike?
"I don't want people thinking my domain is full of clowns—it's embarrassing."
"I understand your feelings on the matter."
With a stronger will than when I had declared the tax hike, I commanded, "Ban it immediately. This cannot be allowed!"
"I imagine telling people it is not allowed will only make them want to do it more, but I will pass your command along to the appropriate parties."
The silly tornado hairstyle was quickly banned after that, but I had been too naïve. I hadn't expected that the subjects who'd accepted my tax increase with barely a peep would rebel over a single hairstyle. Nevertheless, there was a protest the day after the ban.

***

Having become head maid of House Banfield, Serena the spy contacted the prime minister to give her first report.
"I see. So he's raised taxes to start settling a frontier planet in earnest."
"I don't see anything suspicious about the settlement plans, and the tax increase doesn't seem to be prompted by any wasteful spending. If anything, he lives as modestly as ever."
"Well, being too frugal is a different problem. Nobles spending lavishly helps redistribute wealth, after all."
"He must not have much excess. He does seem to be managing the domain's money very efficiently."
"I'd heard he was buying new battleships, so I thought he had plenty of money to spare, but now you tell me he only did that so he could rent them out."
"You almost sound like you *want* there to be some ugly secret here."
"Of course not. I'm celebrating the ascent of a proper noble. It's nice to think that, even with rotten families like House Petack in our midst, there's still hope for the Empire."
House Petack had caused a major incident by joining with the pirates who had attacked House Banfield. Liam hadn't made an issue of it, so the offending house hadn't been dissolved, but the head of the family had been executed per Imperial decree. As there were no nobles who wanted to take over the absolute wreck of a domain, leadership had just passed to Peter as was originally planned. Since Peter's nether regions had exploded, and he wouldn't be able to restore them unless he obtained an enchanted elixir, he would likely be the last head of House Petack. Meanwhile, the vast debt incurred by House Petack was now the responsibility of Peter's betrothed, and therefore of House Razel.
"Also, House Banfield plans on taking in noble children for training in the future, so one of my primary duties here will be assisting with this."

“Hmm. That might be the perfect thing for House Banfield. Do you think they’re ready for it?”
“They plan to have everything in place in ten years or so.”
“Well, we won’t have anything to worry about with you there. Lend House Banfield your full commitment.”
“I plan to. Actually, as a precursor to the noble training, we’ll be taking in some children of House Banfield’s vassal subdomains starting next year.”
“That’s good, but I’d like for you to be able to take in children of barons or lower as well. Education for noble children needs major reform.”
The call ended with that.

***

One year later, House Banfield took in children of other families for the first time to provide them a program of training. These noble families were lower than barons, headed by knights and baronets. They came from domains on the outskirts of the Empire, close to House Banfield, relatively speaking, but still a good distance away in space. The Empire simply didn’t want to spend the money on these outliers’ training, so their families struggled to find proper noble training until House Banfield was approved to provide it.
The children of this first group, gathered in an expansive room of the new training facility, were almost all older than me. When I entered with Brian and Amagi, Serena was there to greet me.
“Master Liam, allow me to introduce you to House Banfield’s very first group of students. Everyone, say hello to Lord Banfield.”
Most of the group greeted me respectfully, but one of the young men was too busy chewing gum. Smirking, he sent a vulgar look Amagi’s way. “The heck? A doll?”
When I furrowed my brow at this, Serena went up to the young man and slapped him across the face. The satisfying sound echoed through the room.
“Hold your tongue!” Serena warned him.
But he didn’t stop there. He went so far as to look down on *me* too. “Don’t go acting all important when you’re just a brat who’s even younger than me.”
Well, one met people like this sometimes, real fools who didn’t know their place because of their sheltered upbringing…not that his ignorance excused him. I pushed past Serena, walked over to the man myself, and decked him. He went flying and smacked into the wall, then slumped down in a coughing fit.
“Y-you little shit!”
I’d held back, yet the guy was wobbling from just one punch. I lost interest in him in an instant.
“We don’t need rebellious idiots here. Brian, throw this one out.”
“Erm, one moment, Master Liam. It’s only the first day.”

“So? He shouldn’t have pissed me off. Anyway, it’s his family’s fault. They’ve clearly failed to teach him basic respect. There’s no merit in pursuing a relationship with the likes of them.”
Although I was always easy on myself, I tended to be hard on others. The room fell silent, and the stunned young man looked like he had no idea what was happening.
“Amagi, make the arrangements to send him back.”
No doubt understanding I wouldn’t change my feelings on the matter, Amagi said, “I will arrange it immediately.”
I glared at the rest of the students who stood before me. “I make the rules here. If any morons want to play king of the hill, I’ll cut ties with their whole family in a second. Keep that in mind while you’re here.”
This time, no one stood up to me. Just how it should be.

***

Several days later, the head of that minor noble’s family came to apologize to me. He sucked up to me, telling me his family would disown him, so could our two houses please continue on the way things had been?
In all my generosity I said yes. I loved it when people buttered me up!
“It’s great having power,” I boasted to Brian after my visitor had left. “In the Empire, I’m just some noble, but I’m king here at home. It’s a wonderful feeling.”
Brian looked somewhat irritated, but he still complimented me. “The head maid was quite impressed with you, sir. She said you were very decisive. Personally, I would have preferred if you had settled the matter a bit more peacefully. It would be counterproductive to alienate our vassals, wouldn’t it?”
“First impressions are important.”
I’d occasionally had trouble with young punks like that in my previous life. No more. I’d kill anyone who looked down on me! That guy should have thanked me for letting him live.
“It seems the other students are acting rather meek after that incident.”
“Well, good.”
“Incidentally,” Brian probed, watching my face closely, “did any of the young ladies at the introduction catch your eye?”
“Ladies? Yeah, sure. What about ’em?”
Brian seemed disappointed with my response. “They are not only here as students, but also as your potential concubines.”
“Huh? Are they really?”
“Well, they *are* your vassals’ daughters, but as long as you don’t have a fiancée, you’re free to keep a few ladies by your side. It wouldn’t do for you to be completely indiscriminate, of course, but showing no interest at all is rather discouraging.”

Nobody had told me about choosing concubines! But if those young women hadn't interested me at the time, it surely meant that they weren't my type.
"Is that how it works? Well, I didn't spot any peerless beauties among them, so what can I say?"
"I shall let Serena know that none of them suited your tastes." As he left, I heard Brian mutter, "Better luck next time."

***

One particular viscount had suffered a very recent demotion. Most of the resource asteroids he controlled were seized by the Empire, and his reputation had been seriously damaged. There was no more Viscount Razel; he was Baron Razel now. It had also been determined in an official report that he was "unfit for training young nobles."
"How did this happen?" Alone in his room, Baron Razel held his head in his hands.
The Empire suspected him of intentionally ignoring the pirate attack against House Banfield. Fortunately for the baron, Liam had been able to wipe out the enemy fleet, leaving no witnesses. After that, the baron himself had gotten rid of the few remaining pirates in his domain.
Still, the Empire's investigation had been more thorough than he'd expected, and in the end, his status had been diminished. The only reason House Razel hadn't been destroyed completely was that it was difficult to govern domains whose leadership suddenly ceased to exist. Mercy hadn't played a part in the Empire's decision.
Then there was the issue with House Petack. House Petack's vast debts were shifting into House Razel's lap because the baron's daughter Katerina was engaged to Peter. Baron Razel wished he could leave this nightmare behind and run away, but if he did that, the Empire would come after him to crush him for sure. No matter what he did now, he could see no bright future for himself…but the bad news didn't end there.
"I can't believe all the merchants ran off too!"
Every merchant he had ties to had left after hearing about his dire circumstances. His other personal contacts had also grown cold as a result of his demotion. Many of them had never been happy about his dealings with pirates, so they'd taken this turn of events as a sign to finally cut ties with him. Even his most competent vassals and knights were jumping ship to find new places of employment. The only ones who remained were those with no opportunity to flee, and one of these was the Hot-Blooded Knight, Liam's former instructor.
"What did I do? Where did I go wrong?"
While Baron Razel despaired, he was being watched—by the Guide.
"I'm disappointed in you." The Guide vented his frustrations at Baron Razel, though the noble didn't notice his presence. "Though I am feeling a little bit

more energized, thanks to your despair. I'll use your suffering to fuel my revenge against Liam."
These words were just as much for Peter as they were for the baron. With so many people in Liam's orbit turning miserable, the Guide had been able to regain some measure of his strength. Still, he hadn't quite reached a point where he could ensure Liam's unhappiness.
The Guide said to himself, "If I have no other options, maybe I should reveal the truth to the boy and drive him to despair that way. Why hasn't he gotten suspicious of me by now?"
He could sense Liam's feelings of gratitude even from here. If he weren't feeding off the anguish from Baron Razel, the Guide would've been deeply wounded by the boy's emotions. Worst-case scenario, he might have completely run out of strength and disappeared for good.
"Dammit! I wish these people were even more wretched and hopeless…then I could have regained more of my power!" Though he couldn't scrounge up his lost power, he did summon a solemn vow. "Next chance I get, I'll send Liam down into the depths of hell!"
Once the Guide had disappeared from the room, Baron Razel lifted his head. It was as if a demon possessing his body had at last relinquished control, and the weight of his misery had been taken away. Unbeknownst to the baron, it had been quite literally sucked out of him.
"I suppose what goes around comes around. There's no choice but to start over from here. I'll contact Katerina first."
Baron Razel rose from his chair, itching to begin anew.

***

Just as the baron seemed free from his demonic possession, so too did Peter Sera Petack. Although his Peter Jr. had recently exploded, he felt oddly lighter. Currently, he lay in bed with Katerina tending to him at his side.
Peter smiled sheepishly at her. "I was a real idiot."
"You finally noticed?" Katerina was exasperated, but she still smiled. She had been nursing Peter efficiently and devotedly since his mishap.
Looking concerned, he went on, "Katerina, you should go home. We can still break off the engagement. I'll testify that there was no physical relationship between us. I can't continue to burden you like this."
While every other person had abandoned Peter, Katerina alone had stuck by him.
"Going home now won't change anything. I told my father before that I wanted to go home, but I don't intend to now. Even if I abandoned you, my family would still be ruined, so we'll just have to shape up House Petack, won't we?"
"I'm sorry, Katerina. I'm so sorry…" Peter began to cry.
Katerina sighed. "It's okay."

She really did intend to rebuild House Petack. Thinking that maybe she was the only one who could accomplish it, she actually felt motivated.
“If House Petack manages to pick itself back up, someone else might come forward to take over as its head. If that happens, let’s just give it to them, and then you and I can retire. We’ll find a way to heal Peter Jr. too.”
“Yeah, let’s do it. I’ll work hard, I promise.”
Much like Liam, Peter had grown up without his parents’ love. He hadn’t known a thing about the world, yet his parents had gone off to live in the Imperial Capital until his father’s recent execution. In Katerina, he’d finally found a person he could rely on. Despite his mountain of problems, he was over the moon about that.

***

“Ugh, my crappy subjects!”
My citizens had been getting increasingly rebellious—fiercely so, as the morons insisted on their right to express themselves as they wished. But rights and freedom were only for me! How dare they think they were entitled to them?
“Why the hell are they so passionate about a hairstyle that looks like excrement?!” I slammed my fists down on the desk in my office.
I’d sent the army in to handle the protests that had been popping up here and there. Thankfully, it was just people walking around with signs that said “Allow the Tornado!” and other slogans, but the military—which I thought would be able to quickly quell the protests—had been hesitant to take control.
Why, you ask? Well, because they “couldn’t kill law-abiding civilians,” of course. How moronic could they be?! So my stupid, unmotivated military was just sitting around watching the protests rage on under their noses. Some of them even said, “What’s the big deal about a hairstyle?” The audacity! All that mattered at this point was that I had declared it outlawed! I couldn’t believe these radicals had been fighting for a hairstyle that looked like coiled feces for all this time now!
“The domain is as peaceful as ever.”
I was stunned by Amagi’s words. How was it peaceful? Protests were occurring every day!
“Peaceful how? My people are rebelling against me!”
I’d hinted to that TV program where I’d first learned of the hairstyle that I was greatly displeased with it, hoping they’d try to sway the public against it, but they had actually doubled down on freedom of expression. The nerve! You’d think they would have wanted to suck up to the guy in power here. And when I’d tried to force an official law into existence, my government officials had told me, “But I don’t think we can really do that…” Apparently, it’d be kind of annoying to actually mandate which hairstyles were okay and which weren’t. I knew that, but still!

Why were these protestors so insistent? Was it actually revenge for the tax thing? That was totally it, wasn't it?! They were just trying to get back at me by throwing a fit over something so insane!
Amagi said, "More importantly, the development of the frontier planet is ahead of schedule. Everyone must think you were very passionate about the project due to the tax increase. The people are putting their all into it."
"No, the hairstyle issue is more important than that! I just… I just don't like it. I don't want the rest of the Empire thinking my domain is full of people with hair that *literally* looks like crap!"
No matter what it took, I'd put a stop to that hairstyle before I had to go off to the next phase of my schooling.

***

Serena was keeping the prime minister in the loop about the daily protests.
"And that about sums it up. Apart from the protests, House Banfield's domain is completely peaceful."
"I understand the count's feelings about those protestors." Having learned of Liam's frustration, the prime minister sympathized with him.
"Anyway, he'll be heading off to boarding school soon."
"I'm sure the count will be fine, but I do hear our boarding schools are full of problem children lately."
There were many problems with the school Liam would be attending after he'd turned sixty. No matter where you looked in the Empire at present, there were problems. One of the reasons the prime minister had such high hopes for Liam was that he was downright sick of the status quo.
"By the way, I noticed that the count purchased a fortress-class vessel from the Seventh Weapons Factory. That seems a little extreme for military expansion. Did he have a reason for it?"
"He's using it to defend the frontier planet," Serena explained. "It's going to take another couple of years to establish a real base there, so he's likely just using it until then."
"How extravagant of him."

***

"My people cannot be allowed to rebel against me!"
I was still enraged by the daily protests occurring in my domain, but the day I would have to head off to boarding school was fast approaching. This was an important time for me, yet my subjects were throwing all sorts of distractions my way.
A fashion magazine I picked up had an article about a further evolution of that hateful hairstyle.
Brian gazed at the open pages with me. "Master Liam, if you try to regulate something, it just makes the people crave it all the more."

“I will crush this hairstyle out of existence!”
I couldn’t believe they’d gotten me this heated. If, as I suspected, the protestors were actually incensed about the taxation, then I could understand where they were coming from. Regardless of what was causing the unrest, they really had to be taught who was in charge!
Brian shook his head. “Maybe it would be best to give up on this, sir.”
“I’m not the one who’s going to give up—they are! They’re going to regret disobeying someone in power!”
“It seems to me the people are quite enjoying all this excitement.”
“That makes it even worse!”
It was fine for me to play with my subjects, but it wasn’t fine for them to play with me. This was a matter of my dignity as an evil lord.
“We’ll push the military to take action. I’ll summon all my knights and equip them with razors, then have them forcefully give every one of these shitheads a buzzcut—hm?”
I paused mid-sentence, noticing that something was strange about Brian. He appeared frozen, as if time had come to a stop.
This sensation was familiar to me. *That’s right, I remember now…*
There was the Guide, looking just as he had in the past—no, he seemed a bit more haggard this time. He’d been sitting in silence on his travel bag with his legs crossed. His hat was pulled low, so I couldn’t see his eyes, but his crescent-moon smile was in plain view.
“Long time no see, Liam!”
“It’s you! This is great… There’s something I’d like to ask y—”
The Guide held up a hand, cutting me off. He seemed to have something important to tell me, and he looked happy to be here. “I’ve been wanting to come see you for the longest time, but I couldn’t until now.”
“I’ve been hoping to see you too. I’ve been wanting to thank—”
The Guide placed his index finger against his lips in a gesture for silence. “Me first, Liam. I have so many things I want to tell you.” The Guide stood up and began to circle the room, speaking unemotionally. “Didn’t you think it was strange?”
“Think what was strange?”
“Everything that’s happened to you so far. Take the matter with House Razel, for instance. You didn’t think it was odd that you were treated so coldly?”
“Not really.”
“Well, you should have!” the Guide bellowed, then caught himself. “Ah, excuse me. Originally, you were the one who was supposed to be showered with luxuries and freedoms, not Peter. This was a chance for you to wed House Razel’s daughter and bond with an influential house. *You* were supposed to be in Peter’s place.”
“You’re kidding!” My eyes flew wide in surprise, and the Guide spread his arms and laughed as if he were enjoying my reaction.

“So why do you think Peter took everything you were supposed to have? Well…there is a mastermind behind all of this.”
“A mastermind?”

“It’s me.”
The Guide bowed like a showman at the end of his performance, then raised his head and laughed at me.
“I set it all up.”
“Y-you did all this?”
“I was the one who stole everything you were supposed to receive! That’s right, Liam, you were deceived!”
This guy…

Epilogue

THE GUIDE had just told me the shocking truth. And for that…I could only be grateful.
“So you really meant it when you said you’d continue your service even after I was reborn in this world.”
“Wha…?” The Guide sounded surprised.
He’s humble, so he’s pretending to be the bad guy even though he’s been looking out for me this whole time. No wonder everything kept going well for me.
“You don’t need to be embarrassed. You were doing a bunch of stuff for me behind the scenes, weren’t you?”
“Er, well, I suppose that’s true in a *way*, but…”
If I’d been given the same treatment as Peter, I’d be chained to Katerina and possibly infected with an STD. This guy had protected not only me, but mini-me as well! Maybe he’d orchestrated it so that I’d meet Kurt and Eila too. That part might have just been fate, but I could picture this guy arranging it. In fact, all my good luck at House Razel might have been because of him.
“You really are a nice guy.”
“Huh? No—” The Guide clutched his chest and began to say something, but this time, I cut *him* off.
“Don’t be so modest. You wanted me to cut ties with House Razel, right? That house is in real trouble right now, anyway. If I’d formed a relationship with them, I’d be dealing with all kinds of problems. So really, thank you.”
I didn’t know exactly what he’d done, but Viscount Razel had made some kind of big mistake and gotten himself demoted. If I’d gotten cozy with his house, I’d be suffering right along with them right now.
“S-stop it…” The Guide was so embarrassed, he almost appeared to be in pain.
This guy is unbelievably kind. Actually, I wonder if House Razel and House Petack are in trouble right now because of his efforts to protect me? It’s possible!
“That upstanding House Petack pissed me off so much… You set them up, didn’t you? Goody two-shoes like them really grind my gears.”
I was extremely thankful that he’d brought down such a sanctimonious house.
“N-no—” In his bashfulness, my savior hid his face in his hands.
I started getting choked up. “You’re great. Um, thanks.”
When I expressed how grateful I was from the bottom of my heart, the Guide let out a scream.
“Graaaaaaaaaah!”

He then disappeared, almost like smoke dispersing in the air. While I stood there, startled, Brian began moving again.
“Is something the matter, Master Liam?”
I gave a little shake of my head, thinking of the humble Guide, who’d fled in embarrassment.
“It’s nothing. Hm, I’m suddenly in a much better mood. Okay, Brian—I’ll give up on the hairstyle thing.”
Brian tilted his head in confusion, then contacted the government office to convey my message.
Hey, I’d made too big a deal of that hairstyle thing. I’d forgive the protestors out of the boundless generosity of my heart.
The one thing that really ticked me off was that the hairstyle went out of fashion less than a few months after I gave in. Were they just teasing me all along?

***

Before I left my domain for boarding school, Nias came to meet with me.
“Lord Liam, could you please buy some battleships from me?”
When I saw Nias, dressed to the nines, I snorted. “Get lost, Little Miss Pathetic.”
“Why are you being so cold to me, Lord Liam?”
Nias was doing pretty well these days, since I’d bought that fortress class from her, so she couldn’t play on my pity. With a snap of my fingers, my servants came in and took her away.
“Just two hundred ships, Lord Liam, pleeeeease!”
As her voice echoed into the distance, perfectly exemplifying the Doppler effect, I thought, That girl still needs a lot of work. I could sit her down and point it all out for her, but part of this little game of ours is that she needs to figure things out for herself.
“Amagi, bring in the next visitor.”
“Yes, Master.”
Amagi let Eulisia of the Third Weapons Factory into my office. Like Nias, she’d dressed up for me, looking nice and sexy.
“I’ve missed you, my lord,” she said seductively.
Eulisia sat down after her husky greeting, and my gaze was drawn to her chest, which was accentuated by her outfit.
“I thought I might be able to introduce you to a few of the new items we’re selling at the Third.”
She brought out her tablet to show me her wares, but I wasn’t interested at all. I didn’t think Eulisia was even serious about making these sales; rather, it seemed like she was trying to sell *herself* to me.
I watched her desperate attempt to appeal to me and thought, *She’s another pathetic one, isn’t she?*
“I’m just not interested in making any purchases right now.”

When I said this, Eulisia actually got up and came over to sit beside me, coiling her arms around me. Unlike the pretty-but-awkward Nias, this one knew how to use her sex appeal.
“If you buy our new products, you can do whatever you like with me, my lord.”
I shook her off, stood up, and clapped my hands. My servants promptly entered to walk Eulisia out.
“M-my lord?!”
I gazed at her just as I would any severe disappointment. “I expected better from you, Eulisia. Such a shame. Take her away!”
“But… But…!”
Eulisia disappeared, just as Nias had. These weapons-factory salesgirls were a mess. Well, they were still pretty amusing, so I’d let the factories keep sending them whenever they wanted to deal with me.
“That brings your morning appointments to an end,” Amagi told me.
“So I’ve got afternoon appointments?”
“Yes. Mr. Henfrey has requested a meeting.”
“Echigoya’s here?”

***

Inside a guest room in Liam’s mansion, Eulisia stood in the lavish bathroom in her underwear, face twisted with frustration.
“I can’t let him keep making a fool of me!”
Eulisia was a woman of ample beauty and talent courted by numerous men in the past. Some of them had even been nobles, but she’d refused all of their advances. Her face could have belonged to an actress, and her figure was the sort that would entice any man. She’d spent considerable time and effort refining herself in order to one day capture the heart of the heir to a grand noble house.
In fact, Eulisia had only applied to work at a weapons factory because they had many dealings with these noble families. She’d polished herself and kept herself pure in order to catch the eye of a wealthy, powerful man. Eulisia felt she had all the qualities for success, and she was correct. However, none of this seemed to have an effect on Liam. At first, she thought it was only a matter of time before she hooked him and thus captured the ideal partner for herself. Her plan was to have Liam dancing in the palm of her hand, so she couldn’t tolerate it when he gave her the cold shoulder.
“I *will* make him want me. And once I have him, I’ll cast him aside. I’m going to laugh when he cries and begs for my forgiveness.”
And so Eulisia had developed a warped desire to catch and toss away a great noble like Liam. In order to follow through with her plan, she’d have to line up another noble with equal or higher standing to move on to. But until then, she would make Liam crave her. She swore it in her heart.

“Hmm, the count will be heading to boarding school soon, won’t he?”
When Eulisia looked into the mirror, her reflection staring back at her with a cold, wicked smile.

***

After a lunch break, I had my meeting with Thomas. We chatted about this and that.
“It’s been difficult to arrange a meeting with you lately, Lord Liam.”
Recently, I’d been overwhelmed by requests for meetings. To make it even more annoying, they all came from people who just wanted to use me for their own benefit without considering what I stood to gain. If they’d been more like my personal merchant, Thomas, or of any use to me at all, it would have been different. Nothing but two-bit villains, the lot of them. It made my head hurt.
“Most of them aren’t even worth my time.”
Thomas replied, “Well, it goes to show how important you’re becoming and how much is expected of you, Lord Liam. Also, people want to catch you before you head off to school.”
Soon, I’d be heading to a boarding school for young nobles, where my real education would begin. I heard nobles were educated in a very strict manner there.
“Don’t remind me. This time, it’s gonna be *six* years.”
“What are your plans after graduation, Lord Liam?”
After I graduated, I would have to head on to whichever military academy or university the Empire designated for the *next* phase of my education, and I had no right to refuse.
“Nothing that’s not already in the works.”
“Will you remain in the Imperial Capital for a time after graduating?”
“Nah, I’ll come right home.”
In the grand scheme of the Empire, I was just some lesser noble, but at home, I was the emperor. I wanted to spend my time in a place where I could throw my weight around, so I was anxious to get all of this training behind me.
“So anyway, things are going well for you now, right?” I narrowed my eyes at Thomas, and he bowed his head. He knew what was on my mind.
“Thanks to the tax reduction you’ve granted our company, we’ll do just fine. I’m very grateful to you, Lord Liam.”
“Of course.”
The Henfrey Company had been lending money to House Petack. I didn’t know what shady things Thomas had been scheming, but since House Petack had fallen, his plans had likely been thwarted. To make up for the loss he’d no doubt suffered, I’d given him a tax break for all deals conducted in my territory for the next few years. I depended on his company, so I needed it to do well.

“Be more careful about your associations from now on.”
“Y-yes, sir. Ah, so…back to the Imperial Capital. Will you be constructing a residence on the Capital Planet, Lord Liam?”
“What do you mean?”
As Thomas explained it, when young nobles went to the Capital Planet, it was customary for them to build their own mansions there. I didn’t think I needed one, but then again, going without might hurt my image. House Banfield had no mansion on the Capital Planet for my personal use.
“My parents and grandparents are still living on the Capital Planet, but moving in with them is the *last* thing I’d want to do, so I guess I will have to build one.”
“The price of land is quite high on the Capital Planet, and it can be tough finding a good location, so if you want to construct a mansion, you should get the wheels turning now or it won’t be ready in time.”
Isn’t it pointless building an entire mansion just so I can study abroad for a half dozen years? Ack… I keep thinking like a commoner, so no wonder Amagi and Brian get impatient with me. I need to aim higher! What should I do, though? Should I consult with my evil merchant?
“How do the really privileged folks go about that?”
“Most will put their mansions as close to the palace as they can manage, and they try to create as unique a building as possible to stand out.”
Unique mansions? I’ve had enough of those… I don’t want to live in a place like that.
“I’ll pass on that. What else?”
“I’ve heard that, instead of building a mansion, some nobles will rent out entire hotels during their stay.”
“Hotels, huh?”
“Yes. Even if you were to build a mansion on the Capital Planet, most of them end up being quite far from the actual schools. Reserving a hotel closer to a school can be more practical, while still being suitably ostentatious.”
People reserved a whole hotel for their time abroad?
“But wouldn’t one room be enough?” I asked.
“Then you wouldn’t have lodgings for your guards or any other staff you might bring. Naturally, renting the entire hotel is a much flashier move as well.”
I guess Thomas did a little research before he brought this up. Renting out a whole hotel, though… Rich people sure come up with some crazy things. Well, I just have to do one better. It’s as simple as that.
“I think I’d prefer to do that, then. Thomas, since you’re being so helpful… get me a list of Capital Planet hotels. Don’t bother with any that aren’t top-class. I don’t care how much money it costs. Even better if it’s a hotel with a long history. I’ll add to their history by blessing them with my presence!”

When I told my worldly personal merchant that I wanted the best of the best and money was no object, he just took it in stride and didn't attempt to dissuade me.
"Very well. I will find a hotel that's suitable for you, Lord Liam."
He seems totally fine with it… How boring.

***

Among the many rooms in House Banfield's mansion, one belonged to Brian. There was a spacious veranda just outside the butler's room, and the precious bonsai trees that Brian cared for were lined up upon it. In fact, the veranda looked more like a small garden.
Brian hummed as he saw to the bonsai that Liam had returned to him. Contentedly, he gazed up at the sky.
"Another gorgeous day."
Before Liam had been born, Brian had never thought a day like this might come. Back then, he'd always been depressed about the state of the domain, but these days, his mood was just as sunny as the weather. Now Liam, who had revitalized the domain, was old enough to attend boarding school. Brian couldn't have been happier that Liam had grown up without any issues.
"I've got to work hard until Master Liam comes into his own."
Finished tending to his bonsai, he looked out from the veranda and noticed Serena coming his way across the mansion's well-kept lawn.
"Oh? What brings you here?" he asked.
Serena looked up from under her parasol. Brian gripped the railing, knowing she could be cold outside of work hours.
"I was just taking a stroll around the mansion, looking things over."
"Always so passionate about your work. Would you like to join me for tea?"
Serena thought for a moment, then nodded. She entered the building and made her way to Brian's quarters, where he was busy preparing the tea. The two of them sat down to chat.
"How's your family doing, Brian?"
"My grandchildren plan on returning soon."
"Oh, really? You called 'em back, then?"
Brian's grandchildren had left House Banfield's domain a long time ago. He was delighted that he could invite them back to it now.
"Yes. It's all thanks to Master Liam. The way the domain is now, I'm sure they'll be able to live a comfortable life here."
Their conversation eventually turned toward their working lives. Serena began grumbling—not about work, but about her life.
"Living long comes with its own problems. Your routines become so much a part of you that it seems unnatural to take time off."
"You're a workaholic." Brian laughed, and Serena agreed with him.
"You've wound up with a good employer, Brian. I guess it was worth putting up with the ones before him."

“I wasn’t putting up with them; I was repaying my debt to Liam’s great-grandfather, Master Alistair.”
“I still say you should have come to the palace when you had a chance. I’m sure you would’ve earned a very good position.”
Serena had once invited Brian to come work with her in the palace, but Brian was glad that he’d said no then.
“I’m happy here now, so I don’t regret it.”
“Then I envy your simple happiness.”

***

The Guide lay facedown on the ground some distance away from the mansion. When he revealed the truth to Liam, the boy had thanked him so much, it had nearly killed him. He could barely move, and he was, in fact, starting to disappear.
He’d never imagined for a second that the boy would be so earnestly thankful to him even after his confession. *What is it with that boy?* The Guide was starting to become seriously afraid of Liam. It threw him off that the boy didn’t catch on no matter what he did.
His breathing labored, the Guide tried to articulate his resentment.
“C-curse you, Liam. I will have my reveeenge… You will knooow…my gruuudge…”
If he was going to take revenge, he would first have to recover. To do so, he would need to absorb as many negative emotions as he could.
“I know—the Imperial Capital Planet. There’s a constant stream of negativity there. If I can make it there, I’ll recover.”
Next time, he would absolutely have his vengeance. With that thought burning inside him, the Guide struggled to his feet and staggered off.
A dog followed behind him. Its ghostly form was gradually becoming clearer, but the weakened Guide still didn’t notice its presence. Limping along, he uttered his desperate oath for the umpteenth time.
“The next time we meet, Liam, it’ll be the end for you!”

Bonus Story:
Mass-Produced Maids

MANY MAID ROBOTS worked in Liam's mansion, but apart from Amagi, they were all mass-produced. Since they shared the same face and frame, the only difference between the maids was the individual hairstyles and whatever small accessories they wore to make it easier to differentiate them.

One such maid, Shirane, was walking through the halls of the mansion. Liam's residence was expansive enough to contain an entire city, so a team of maids was stationed in each section. The long hallways were also extremely wide, so much so that most people used vehicles to get through them.

Shirane scanned her area to make sure there wasn't a hair out of place. She walked wordlessly, the sounds of her footsteps echoing through the spacious hallway. Some workers passed by her in a vehicle on their way to make repairs somewhere or other. The men balked when they saw Shirane.

"It's spooky, seeing a doll in a deserted place like this."

"Quiet, idiot! If the count hears you say that, he'll lop your head off!"

"But they *are* scary, aren't they? They have no expressions, so you can't tell what they're thinking. They're like AIs stuffed inside mannequins. They'd never betray us, would they?"

Many humans in the Empire found androids creepy, and these workers were no exception. The workers could never have guessed what was going on inside Shirane's head at this moment. Even as she walked, Shirane was connected to the network the maid robots had set up for themselves not long ago, something like their own social media site where they could post pictures, videos, and comments. Here, Shirane had just posted about the wastefully large size of the mansion.

"All this space is so pointless. Like, seriously pointless. Taking care of it is a total waste of effort."

She'd complained specifically about a part of the mansion that wasn't currently in use, and other maid robots had commented on this post.

"Yes, what a waste of resources!"

"You should just focus and do your work."

"I'm so booored. Bored enough to comment here."

With their specs, they were equipped for just about anything. Liam was a bit of a show-off, so even these mass-produced androids had the best possible specs available. In other words, all of his maid robots were massively overqualified for their jobs.

"Huh? Where's our supervisor, Amagi?"

Several of them were surprised to find Amagi not utilizing the network, as she often did. Some maid robots who were in Amagi's vicinity provided images to depict her current situation.
"Entertaining Master!"
The images showed Amagi preparing tea for Liam. She had cut herself off from the network to focus solely on serving him.
"Oh, so just the usual."
The other maid robots changed the subject. Their next topic of conversation was Liam, who was currently smiling at Amagi as he accepted his tea.
"Has Master given all of us names now?"
"He has."
"Sure has. Gave me mine."
Liam kept his distance from flesh-and-blood women, but he had no such reservations about maid robots. He'd given them all names because he felt strange addressing them as numbers.
"After my last maintenance, I did my hair like Shiomi."
"Aha, so you're the one imitating me!"
"Oh, crap."
One of the units who'd changed her hairstyle for fun segued into discussing Liam again.
"Let me finish. I got called in by Master Liam, and I got to wondering: if I ever change my hairstyles and accessories, would he get my name wrong because we're all the same identical model? So I went to see him, and what do you think he called me?"
"Shiomi, duh. If you change your hairstyle, it's impossible to distinguish between us."
"Definitely Shiomi. Everything else is the same, after all."
As mass-produced units, their faces and bodies were all identical. If they changed hairstyles, it would be difficult to identify them accurately. Apparently, this wasn't the case for Liam.
"Nope. He took one look at me and guessed who I was. He said, 'Imitating Shiomi, Shirane?'"
If the units had some sort of visual identification, like tattooed numbers, it would have been understandable, but the maids were all shocked that Liam had identified the unit even after she had changed her superficial appearance.
"Huh?"
"Wow, Master's amaaazing! You're not lying, are you?"
"Wanna see the video I took? Do ya?!"
Shirane had gone out of her way to preserve the moment in a video. She played it for the others, and all the maids who were accessing the network began to clamor.
In the video, Shirane approached Liam while pretending to be Shiomi. Just as she'd claimed, Liam instantly recognized her.
"Imitating Shiomi for a change of pace, Shirane?"

Liam had reacted coolly, not showing any sort of surprise. It was Shirane who ended up frozen in astonishment for several seconds.
The video ended there, and the maid robots got all fired up about it.
“How could he tell them apart?”
“Master’s kinda scary! Seriously, how could he tell? We always hear complaints from humans about how we have no individuality.”
“Well, crazy people who swing swords around all the time are… crazy. He’s completely unfathomable.”
Their human master utilized an inexplicable sword style called the Way of the Flash, and he could tell completely identical maid robots apart. It fascinated them. While the maids were enjoying their discussion about Liam, Amagi connected to the network.
“I will not allow any insults about our master, girls.”
“Amagi’s here!”
“Run away!”
“I just remembered something urgent I must attend to, so I’ll be going.”
The maids left the chatroom one by one, leaving Shirane all alone with their supervisor. Shirane made to leave as well, but Amagi used her administrator privileges to keep her there.
“I-I regret what I said.”
Amagi condemned Shirane for the prank she’d pulled.
“I am sure you do, but I will be confiscating those pictures and videos. Honestly, why in the world would you play a prank on him anyway?”
Amagi requested the files containing Shirane’s images of Liam, but Shirane resisted.
“No, I swear, it wasn’t a prank—”
“I am confiscating them.”
“B-but I—”
“I will say it again: I am confiscating them. No data shall remain.”
No matter how many times Shirane resisted, Amagi’s persistence eventually won out, and she collected Shirane’s precious data. She wouldn’t permit Shirane to keep a single copy, so Shirane attached a little sobbing image of herself with the files.
Finally, Amagi disconnected from the network.
“Boy, you can’t let your guard down for a second with her.”
When Amagi had taken her leave, the maid robots who’d fled returned.
“Maybe the supervisor wants to keep the images and videos for herself.”
“That’s an abuse of her authority! We should complain!”
“She needs to hand over Master’s pics!”
When her colleagues started ranting, Shirane complained, *“You ran away and left me behind!”*
But the maids only had a perfunctory apology for Shirane.
“Sorry, okay?”

When they didn’t show any remorse for their actions, Shirane decided to get back at them. She produced a different video of Liam. She played only a few seconds of it, then stopped at a good part and took it down.
“Come on! You have to upload the rest!”
With her colleagues clamoring for more, Shirane got to act high and mighty.
“Hmm, what should I do? I could just keep it to myself, of course…”
While her colleagues virtually ground their teeth in frustration, Shirane continued walking expressionlessly through the hallways. One of the mansion’s newly hired servants was nearby, and they ran toward some other servants in fear when Shirane approached. Shirane could hear their hushed voices.
“That’s another of those maid robots, right?”
“Shh! She’ll tell on you if she hears you!”
“I really can’t tell them apart. It’s just their hair that’s different.”
Shirane clearly overheard the three servants discussing her, but she showed no reaction. Nothing they said was unusual, after all. Meanwhile, the servants continued openly expressing their unease.
“They’re so creepy.”
“What are they thinking?”
“Cut it out! I swear you’ll be executed if it hears you!”
Liam’s warm treatment of the maid robots was well known. There was a rumor that he trusted androids more than he did real people—and it was true.
“Our master would be perfect if he didn’t have such an obsession with these dolls.”
“Just don’t get involved with them.”
“Come on, let’s get out of here.”
The three hurriedly moved on. If the servants knew what the maid robots they feared so much were really thinking…maybe things would be different between them.
What would they think if they saw our logs?
Shirane wondered whether those servants would be disgusted if they knew what the maids chatted about on their private network. Or, upon seeing how humanlike they were, would they be ashamed of themselves for fearing the robots?
In the now-completely deserted hallway, Shirane smiled to herself.
“Humans really are interesting.”
However, Shirane’s smile soon faded—she’d received a communication from Amagi.
“Shirane, you will hand over every video file you have on our master. Do not think you can keep any secrets from me.”
Her disgruntled colleagues must have told on her, and Amagi demanded the secret video that Shirane had hung on to.
“Supervisooor!”

Afterword

HELLO, this is Yomu Mishima, the author.

Thank you so much for purchasing Volume 2 of *I'm the Evil Lord of an Intergalactic Empire!* Volume 2 of my sci-fi-style fantasy novel is finally on sale. There's even a manga version in the works, so as the author, I couldn't be happier.

Since we've come this far, I was telling my editor that we should make our goal nice and lofty. Normally, that would mean an anime, but for this series, I'd simply like to see models made of the Avid and the Nemain first. But if they made an anime first and *then* models of these crafts after that, all the better! Dreaming about it is free! I'd love it if you readers would hope along with me to see Nadare-sensei's cool Avid and Nemain designs immortalized in three dimensions.

So our goal is…a model of the Avid!

Well, I've increased the story's volume from the web version again, so we're right at our page limit, which means this is as far as the afterword goes. I hope you'll continue to support me in the future!

Congrats on Volume 2!

Here's Brian's bonsai, which played a bigger role than I'd expected.

NADARE TAKAMINE

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